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MAMMON

By MRS. ALEXANDER

MAMMON

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER

AUTHOR OF

"*THE WOOING O'T*," "*RALPH WILTON'S WEIRD*," "*MONA'S CHOICE*," *&c.*

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MAMMON.

CHAPTER I.

"THE WANDERER RETURNS."

THE shutters were closed and the gas alight, in one of those highly respectable semi-detached villas which adorn Lichfield Road, Maida Hill, N.W.—an exceedingly genteel though decidedly bourgeois quarter. It was a chill, foggy evening towards the end of October, some five or six years ago, and dinner was being served to two gentlemen, in the fairly well-furnished but rather bare dining-room. There was the usual massive table, one arm and twelve unarmed chairs—all remarkably solid and covered in leather a good deal the worse of the wear,—a sideboard, a plate-warmer, a dark, much worn carpet, faded curtains once deep red, and a few old-fashioned prints on the walls.

A clock on the mantelshelf was the sole ornament. Of flowers, knick-knacks, bronze or china, there were none. Nevertheless there were no signs of neglect. The furniture, the brass on the fender, the silver on the table, were cleaned and polished to an unusual pitch of perfection—the grate was black-

leaded till it shone with dark lustre, the fire, though small, was clear and bright and was reflected in the brilliant steel irons.

A sober-looking, hard-featured woman, dressed in black with a long white apron and a real cap tied under the chin, waited on the *convives* with much deliberation.

Of these the elder was evidently the host. A slight grey man, rather bent, with a wide, thin-lipped mouth and keen, steel-blue eyes, his features well cut, the forehead a little narrow. His hair was nearly white, and his expression somewhat grim.

He had just cut a slice from a delicately browned loin of mutton which he passed to his companion, while the attendant was carrying a soup tureen out of the room.

This companion was many years younger than his host—a tall, well-made, well-dressed man, distinguished-looking but by no means handsome. His brow was wide, his jaw square, clean-shaved, and displaying a firm, even harsh mouth, his complexion dark, his hair brown, his eyes large, thoughtful, and so deeply blue as to be almost black. His hands were lean but muscular; what they touched they held firmly and deftly. Both gentlemen were in morning dress; that of the elder was threadbare and white about the seams but carefully brushed, that of the younger fresh and in the best fashion then prevailing.

"Ha!—hum, perhaps you take currant jelly?" said the host. "It is quite unnecessary in my opinion, and I doubt if there is any in the house."

"It is of no consequence," returned the guest in a pleasant full-toned voice, with a slight smile.

"I hate superfluities," resumed the host. "They only bewilder the palate and disturb digestion."

Here the solemn servant returned, and immediately presented the guest with a small modicum of jelly on a little round glass dish.

"Hey! You had better offer the vegetables to Mr. Brandon," said her master in a slightly surprised voice,—and dinner proceeded in silence, broken by an occasional dropping fire of remarks relating to the commercial news of the day. The repast was severely simple, yet well-cooked and good of its kind, and when the last dish was removed and the crumbs swept off, the servant put a decanter of port and another of sherry before her master, placing a plate of dry biscuits in the middle of the table.

The host's sharp eyes wandered to the sideboard and watched her as she placed the nearly empty bottle of light claret which had been their only dinner wine in the cellarette. She then carefully selected two or three lumps of coal, adding them to the bright fire, before she finally left the room.

"Help yourself," said the host, pushing over the heavy, old-fashioned decanters.

"Thank you!" and Brandon filled his glass with port, which he proceeded to sip very slowly. "You said you wished to consult me about some plan or scheme," said the younger man after waiting for Tracey to break the silence.

"Yes,"—a pause—"yes, there are two or three matters I wish to discuss with you!" the old man paused again—Brandon waited. "The information you obtained respecting that Indian Mining Company was useful, very useful," resumed Mr. Tracey,

speaking slowly, thoughtfully, while a far-away look came into his eyes. "I was able to sell out at par, before there was even a downward tendency. Your suggestions have always brought me luck."

"I am glad you think so," returned Brandon.

"Yes, you have been lucky to me, Brandon. I believe you will be lucky to yourself. If I had taken you into partnership six years ago, I should not need to wind up business as I am doing. But you were not trained to it! You were not trained to it," he added in almost a pathetic tone.

"No! nor should I have been of any real service to you as a regular employé. I think I understand my own capabilities, such as they are."

"I daresay you do! You have a clear head, Ralph Brandon, and you will succeed, but you are terribly weighted for the race. Now I had the advantage of starting without sixpence of my own, and knowing I had myself only to depend upon, I took care of the pence—ay! and of the halfpence!—while you had a bit of money and thought yourself heir to a baronetcy and ten thousand a year! That, and inherited habits of extravagance, were enough to ruin any man!"

"I don't think I was wildly extravagant," said Brandon.

"I suspect you were! Yet when your money was gone and an unexpected legitimate son cropped up to seize your uncle's fortune before the breath was out of his body, you had the strength to set to work and even to pinch and save. *That* shows you are one of the rare ones who can learn the value of money!

Almost all who know it do so by instinct, by a gift of nature. An excellent gift!" He paused.

Brandon smiled and sipped his wine.

"How long is it since old Peterson brought you into my office and said you could give me a bit of information about that Mysore business?"

"About seven years, I think," returned Brandon.

"Ay, that was a great hit, and then it turned out you were a distant connection! Ah! If I had had a son like *you*, I shouldn't be afraid of what would happen to my hard earnings when I am not here to look after them. *You* would take care of the cash, though you are different from me. You care for other things too,—you like money for the sake of what it brings and buys. *I* love it for itself!"

"Mine is the more reasonable love," said Brandon.

"Ay—you hanker after politics, place, power,—well, well, that is all right so long as you don't cut the ground, which is capital, from under your feet by paying too dear for what you get. Yet I *wish* you were my son! It is a bitter grief that my only child is a puny girl!—a creature that will give my money to some scoundrelly spendthrift! No woman ought to have money beyond what suffices for the absolute needs of existence. Anything more should be just payment for the pleasure or profit she brings into some man's life!"

"Pray, did you preach that doctrine to the late Mrs. Tracey?" asked Brandon with a slightly mocking smile.

"No! *She* brought me money! Not much, but enough to give me just the impetus I needed then. She never gave me much trouble—but she was ter-

ribly weak, she let the servants have all their own way and spent too much. Then her death when the child was still almost a baby entailed great inconvenience and—and expense! A girl never repays you for the cost of education and maintenance, nor can you, save in rare cases, teach women the value of money."

"From some points of view they put a tolerably high value on it." There was a tinge of bitterness in Brandon's tone as he said this.

"Ay, as something to buy gewgaws with!" returned Tracey contemptuously. "Not as a precious possession to add to, to watch growing, growing—till it becomes a great power."

"No. They like immediate enjoyment!"—another pause broken abruptly by Mr. Tracey.

"I expect my daughter home to-morrow," he said.

"Indeed! She has, I believe, been absent for a considerable time."

"No! she came home the autumn before last, for two months, when I had the sharp attack of bronchitis. Now she must reside with me till she marries."

"Oh, indeed! Who is the happy man?"

"That I don't know yet. She was nineteen in August last. I should like to see her settled with a prudent husband before I go. People will get hold of the idea that she has a lot of money, and she will be taken with some good-looking scapegrace—girls are such fools!"

"Wiseacres do not predominate in either sex," said Brandon. "Miss Tracey has been in Germany for the last two years, I believe?"

"Nearer three! Her education has cost me a for-

tune, and it is all so much money clean thrown away! First ten years off and on at school, or with Mrs. Selby. Then these, say, three years in Dresden!"

"Who is Mrs. Selby?"

"Her aunt, Mrs. Tracey's elder sister,—she is considered a what-ye-call-'em,—an admirable, superior woman I am told; *I* think her an infernal self-opinionated, prying, meddlesome hag! Fancies I am made of money!—I suspect she and her brood nearly live on what I pay for Claudia."

"Is the lady a widow?"

"No, she has a big blustering, blundering trooper of a husband—would do for a railway porter—never had sixpence—or could make sixpence! She has daughters of her own—and, no doubt, got their education out of my allowance. What women want with all this useless learning *I* don't know."

"Still, Mr. Tracey, your daughter and heiress ought to be educated like a gentlewoman!"

"She is a great trouble to me, Brandon! a very great trouble. I am willing to do my duty by her—I *have* done it; but now I want a little peace before I die! If I could only see her and my money in the hands of a safe, steady man. Look here, Brandon, why don't *you* marry her?"

"I!" exclaimed Brandon, fairly startled out of his quiet indifference. "Such an idea never crossed my mind!"

"Well, take it in now! Marry her, and I will leave all I have to you both! You will value my money, ay! and increase it! You will build up power and position with it—while *she!*—she is quite incapable of appreciating it—quite! She is just a

silly, empty-headed girl. But, gentle and biddable, she wouldn't give you any trouble. She is just like her mother, fond of flowers and books and such like trash. But inoffensive! Think of it, Brandon! just give my scheme your best consideration. Take another glass of port!" he added effusively, in the ardour of his urging.

"No, thank you, Mr. Tracey. You are not very complimentary to your daughter! Such a proposition requires a good deal of thought. I am not by any means disposed to marry——"

"No—no—I daresay not—but sometimes it is a wise step—a wife is a sort of necessity to some careers. Of course you are no fool, you have no fancies about love and beauty and rubbish of that sort!"

"No!" said Brandon, smiling. "I have survived the calf period; it lasted a very short time with me. But I will never marry a woman who would not in some degree do me credit—in looks and manners at least,—not that I doubt your daughter's possession of these qualities, but she was a mere child when I saw her, indeed I have no distinct recollection of her."

"She is no beauty, Brandon!" said the very impartial father, "but she is a gentlewoman, so far as I can judge, for such matters are out of my ken! Then I have a good lump of money to leave behind, for"—with a sigh—"I cannot take it with me—more than you think—I'll tell you all, all particulars about it when you promise to marry my daughter—not before. And I'll make a settlement upon you—a fair settlement. Then I will know that my hard earnings are safe."

Brandon looked at him for a moment with a slightly

cynical smile before he said : "My agreement to your proposition is only half the battle. How do you know that Miss Tracey might not reject me with scorn?"

"Why should she? You have a smooth tongue, she has a dull home, a girl is generally inclined to take the first man who asks her. Besides, she has always been an obedient daughter—then I fancy you are a sort of fellow to get on with women."

Brandon shook his head. "I doubt it. If I do, my attraction must be my utter indifference."

"Well, what do you say?" asked Tracey.

"I *will* consider your offer," returned the other, more seriously. "Money is very essential to me at this stage of my career. I think I might get a seat in Parliament at the coming general election, if I chose to stand, but an impecunious M.P. is at a disadvantage."

"You are right, Brandon, quite right. Yet I would not throw money away on such a bauble as a seat in the House of Commons."

"Nor I, believe me! I mean, I want the personal freedom that sufficient means bestows. Of course, Mr. Tracey, I am flattered by your readiness to confide your fortune and your child to my keeping, but, remember, I will have no force put on the young lady, nor must she be hurried in any way. Let us meet, and leave the rest to me. If I make up my mind that your project is feasible, I will tell you, and I shall begin the siege."

"Ay, and lose no time! I want things settled; I want my mind to be at rest for the few years I have to live. You'll find Claudia a quiet, home-staying girl."

"I assure you I am disposed to think your ducats and your daughter a godsend. But I *must* see her, and she must be fairly willing to accept me. My requirements in a wife are few and simple—tolerable good looks, quiet manners, a fairly good temper, and the sense to hold her tongue on subjects of which she knows nothing. I have quite survived any boyish fancies respecting devoted love, sympathy, companionship, and all the rest of the novelists' stock-in-trade. But human nature is weak, and wants a certain amount of garnish round the solids of life. Now, Mr. Tracey, I must wish you good evening. I have to fill some columns before I sleep."

"Good-bye, Brandon! I think I'll have my way with you. Come and dine on Sunday. Claudia will have recovered the fatigue of her journey——"

"Sunday? I regret I am engaged. Indeed Sunday is always a busy day."

"Well, Saturday, then?"

"Thank you! I shall be very happy—and pray do not speak of me in any way to Miss Tracey—whatever a woman's intellectual powers may be, her instinct is marvellous!"

"Do you think I need a lesson in holding my tongue?" returned Tracey, with a self-satisfied grin.

"Well, no! I fancy nature taught you that originally! Good-night, Mr. Tracey. I will execute your commission in the city, and let you know the result, the day after to-morrow at furthest."

They shook hands, and Brandon set forth at a rapid pace in the direction of his chambers.

"It is a good chance for me, undoubtedly," he thought, as he reviewed this conversation with his

host. "Without money progress is barred on the right hand and on the left! I would rather have the ducats without the daughter, but if she is not objectionable and I cannot get the ducats unencumbered, why, I shall take them both. Then a fair vista opens before me! Life is dull without an object—a tolerably big object! There are great changes, social and political, before us. Why should I not hold the ribbons as well as some who have handled the team before now? I *have* some convictions as to the road we ought to travel,—which is more than many can boast of. After all, the last state of this man may be better, more exciting, than those first halcyon days of wild pleasure! Had I never known a check I should have been probably even more disenchanted, and a good deal more sick of life than I am! Hi! hansom——" he jumped into a "London gondola," and directed the driver to——

* * * * * * *

The next day was no improvement on the dull, drizzling weather of the previous evening, yet a certain air of cheerful expectation pervaded the lower regions of Mr. Tracey's quiet house.

Mrs. Tibbets, his *multum in parvo*, being housekeeper, cook and housemaid in one, had lit a fire in a small breakfast parlour which opened on the garden downstairs, and laid out the table with a kind of *déjeuner à la fourchette.*

"She'll be hungry after her journey, poor dear!—and be a deal comfortabler here than upstairs, I'll be bound," she said to herself, as she moved to and fro, between parlour and kitchen. "I'm sure it will be a blessing to have a bit of life in the house! There's

his bell! He'll be breaking the wire!" She mounted rapidly to the study—a small room at the back of the house, habitually used by the master, where he pored over his accounts, wrote his letters, studied the financial news in the papers, and ate his frugal meals. The housekeeper found him as usual, neat and precise in his well-preserved garments,—his breakfast had been long cleared away.

"What are you about?" he asked, looking up from his desk, with knitted brow and nostrils drawn in as if he smelt some disagreeable odour. "There's a smell of burning wood, and a crackling of sticks! what are you doing?"

"My business," returned Tibbets sturdily. "I've put a fire in the breakfast parlour for Miss Claude, so that she may have her bit in comfort and you be left in peace."

"What! another fire! when there's one here that would roast an ox!"

"A mouse you mean!" retorted Tibbets contemptuously. "Never you mind! If I burn more coal than you allow, why, I'll pay for it, that's all. Now I'm going to put a bit more on here, or you'll be screaming for sticks in a quarter of an hour, and I'll have you to know, half a bundle of sticks is worth two lumps of coal any day! There's the bell, and I heard a cab stop—that's Miss Claude!" She went out hastily, leaving the door open.

"Infernal shrew," muttered her master, shooting an angry glance after her, "still I am better off with her than a stranger! I know she has too big a housekeeping allowance, but she *does* keep within it. I suspect she's saving a fortune."

He rose slowly and stood beside his table listening to the scuffling of feet as if luggage was being carried in. "Ha—hum. *I* have no pence for these raving wolves—she must pay for her boxes herself! Ha, Claude!" he said aloud, "you are behind time, child." A slight girl below middle height wrapped in a rough warm cloak came in as he spoke. She hastily unfastened a long black gauze veil which was thrown loosely round her face and neck, and taking the thin hand extended to her—drew closer and lifted up a pale pathetic face as if expecting a kiss,—which he bestowed in an awkward, unaccustomed fashion.

"We had a rough crossing," she said, "and were more than an hour late at Queenborough."

"Ha—you look like it, child! Hope you haven't taken cold: it would be a bad beginning."

"Oh! no. I think not—Uncle Selby has come all the way with me here, father. He will come and speak to you before he goes."

"He is uncommonly obliging," returned Mr. Tracey.

A quick heavy step approached, and a very tall large broad-shouldered man, looking quite gigantic in a huge ulster, came into the room, taking off his travelling cap with one hand and stretching out the other to his brother-in-law, exclaiming, "How goes it, Tracey? Hope you are better? though you look no great shakes!" as he gave the limp fingers, ungraciously yielded, a vigorous grasp.

"Thank you, I am pretty well." The thin cold voice contrasted strongly with the deep hearty bluff tones of Major Selby, who had a big red-brown face with light laughing eyes, the mouth and chin so thickly

covered with profuse light-brown moustaches and beard that no conscientious physiognomist would venture to hazard a guess at his character.

"Brought your little girl back to you—safe and sound! Deuced sorry to lose her, I can tell you!—My wife and the girls were crying their eyes out when we started, but you have the best right to her. Hey? Nothing like a nice kind daughter to coddle up old fellows such as we are—except indeed a good wife! I expect you'll be ground young again after three months of Claude's care. Eh! my boy?" a heavy slap on the shoulder which nearly drove the breath out of Tracey's frail body. "Gad, it's worth being sick to be nursed by a sweet girl like Claude! Now I must be off. Oh, by the way! I have no more English silver! Lend me five shillings, will you?"

"Very sorry. I have only eighteenpence in the house," said Tracey drily, "and that will be of no use to you."

"Oh, yes, it will—better half a loaf than no bread! Hand it out? Shall I give you an I.O.U.?" and he laughed stormily.

Tracey reluctantly drew out a thin flat porte-monnaie, and extracted therefrom two sixpences, a fourpenny piece and three halfpence.

"But, Uncle Selby, I have half-a-crown and—do take it!"

"Thank you, my darling, I will: thank you, Tracey. All right, Claude. I'll settle up when I come again."

"But will you not stay to breakfast?" cried Claude.

"No, no, thank you" exclaimed Selby hastily. "I

shall get my breakfast at the club—you must excuse me, I've lots to do, Tracey, or I'd stay with you. I have to find lodgings for my people, and do a heap of commissions. We are coming over bag and baggage the end of the month—going to settle in London for good and all—so my hands are full."

"You'll find it an expensive place to live in, Major Selby," said Tracey in a dry tone.

"Very likely—but Mrs. Selby will manage all that. She's a wonderful woman, sir!—beats *you* at management I believe, yet has everything nice and comfortable even with our beggarly income! Well, good-bye to you, Tracey—you'll forgive me for not staying to breakfast. Look after Claude; make her eat and give her some of your famous port wine! Nothing like good food and plenty of it to keep the roses blooming in her cheeks;" another huge hand-shake and then he held out his arms to Claude, who sprang into them and was lost to sight for a moment.

"Good-bye, dear, dear uncle! and thank you ever so much for all your kindness."

"Pooh—fiddle de dee! you deserve it!"

"Do take a house near us, uncle! come and see me soon. Be *sure* you come!"

"All right, my dear: take care of yourself—write to your aunt before five to-day. Good-bye—God bless you," and the Major strode off and banged the Hall door behind him.

Claude stood looking after him, her eyes suspiciously moist. Mr. Tracey watched her with a slight smile.

"Is your heart breaking for the departure of your beloved uncle, hey?" he asked.

"I am very sorry indeed to part with Uncle Selby," she returned, as she took off her toque. "You don't know how good and kind he has been to me! But they will all be here soon," she added cheerfully, turning to her father.

Claudia—or, as she was commonly called, Claude Tracey—looked more like seventeen than nineteen; her slight figure was below middle height; her face could boast no beauty, it was small and pale; the chin fine, the brow broad, the mouth rather wide, yet sweet; her large eyes darker than might be expected from her fair silky hair, which grew thickly and prettily round her forehead. The general verdict upon the rich Mr. Tracey's only child was—"A nice little thing, but rather plain."

"I suppose your father is a disagreeable old hunks compared with this delightful relative, who, by the way, is no relation really."

"I don't think that," said Claude, with a smile that lit up her face wonderfully. "It would be very dull if all were alike. But we have to make each other's acquaintance, I have been so much away. Have we not, dear father?" and she took his hand with a timid but caressing gesture.

"Don't know me yet?" he returned grimly, as he withdrew his hand. "I fancy I know you!"

Here Mrs. Tibbets made her appearance. "You'll be wanting a bite, Miss Claude, and it's ready for you downstairs."

"Thank you, I will come!" and Claude followed the housekeeper to the parlour, where a good fire and neatly laid table awaited the young traveller.

"You'll be tired, I'm thinking," said Mrs. Tibbets,

as she assisted her to remove her cloak, avoiding the girl's eyes, for she saw they were full of tears.

"Yes, I am very tired—and I am sorry to part with my aunt and cousins! But I must take care of my father now, and brighten him up. He has been left too long alone! Oh! how thankful I am that you did not go away as you threatened, Tibbets! Promise me you will stay!" and Claude caught Tibbets' strong rough hand in both her own.

The formidable housekeeper did not answer immediately, she looked down with a softened expression into the appealing eyes uplifted to hers, and then said gravely, even solemnly:

"Ay! I'll stay with you, Missee! and stand by you too, unless the master turns me out!"

"Thank you! Oh, thank you, Tibbets."

"There, now sit down and eat. The tea is nice and fresh. Law, Miss Claude, but you look pale and thin. Had you enough to eat in them outlandish places?"

"Oh, yes, plenty! But how nice it is to see everything so bright and clean."

"That's right. I wanted things to seem a bit home-like. Now eat up this slice of ham! Here's some buttered toast and a nice hot cup of tea, then you come up to your room and I'll unpack for you. I've lit a spark of fire there, but don't you say nothing about it to the master."

"Would he be displeased?"

"Why, now, Miss Claude—is he *ever* pleased when there's a bit of fire more than is absolutely needed, or a crumb of food over and above what'll keep body and soul together. Don't you go for to deceive your-

self, you just take him for what he is. If you think you'll make anything different of him you'll just tear your heart out."

"You judge too hardly, Tibbets," said her young lady thoughtfully, while a dreamy, yearning look came into her eyes. "He has been too much alone—now that I shall be with him all day and every day, you will see how I shall creep into his heart!"

"Well, well, maybe so! Just eat your breakfast, my dear, and think no more about it!"

CHAPTER II.

A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

CLAUDE TRACEY was naturally shy and reserved; she also had a degree of surface timidity which deceived even herself. Had she remained always under her father's roof she would probably have been mentally and physically numbed into a torpid condition.

Of her mother she had no recollection, and her early childhood left no picture of happiness or tenderness on the tablet of her memory. Her first nurses were constantly changed as unsatisfactory from an economical point of view, so that little or no attachment grew up between her and her attendants. When she was about six Mrs. Tibbets came into Mr. Tracey's service, and, for a wonder, established herself firmly in his estimation.

To speak metaphorically, she was "a hair of the dog that bit him," that is, she was herself addicted to scraping and saving—not to such a degree as to have lost that balance of judgment which told her there *was* a point beyond which sparing was as wasteful as spending—moreover, she was a masterful woman, with a stout heart, who regarded her employer's ill-tempered snarling no more than she did the barking of a chained house-dog—being quite ready to seek service elsewhere.

Matters between them settled into an armed neu-

trality. But beneath Mrs. Jemima Tibbets' stern exterior lurked a certain weakness, and that weak spot was occupied by her Master's little daughter.

Her heart relented towards the pale, delicate, supernaturally quiet child, and the little creature soon grew to love and trust her rugged protectress. The result was an increase of vitality and briskness in the child which filled the soul of Tibbets with gladness.

When Claude was eight years old, Major and Mrs. Selby returned from India. Mrs. Selby lost no time in visiting her favourite sister's little daughter. This visit led to many skirmishes between her and her brother-in-law about the child, her health, her education and many other matters. Then Mr. Tracey sent her to school, where she stayed some time, spending the larger half of her holidays with the Selby family. Finally finding that board, lodging and education were not to be found cheaper elsewhere Claude was permitted to go with her aunt and cousins to Dresden.

In the warm, kindly family life of the Selbys the motherless girl's nature unfolded like a blossom to the sun. Invigorated by this atmosphere she returned with the ardent hope of winning her father to something like the love and confidence lavished by Major Selby on his daughters.

Though Claude kept a brave face, this home-coming was a tremendous trial. The chill cleanliness and order of the house, the utter absence of all small ornaments and superfluities which give homelike grace to a habitation, the profound stillness, her father's habitual silence ; all conspired to depress. She occasionally nerved herself to ask him a question, or ven-

ture some little description of her life in Dresden. He used to look up and listen with a half surprised, half impatient expression and answer "Indeed!" "Ah!" "Um!" or take no notice whatever. Once Claude seeing her father copy long rows of figures from a paper into a huge book asked timidly if she might help him. For answer he pushed the book towards her bidding her "Look here! How do you think your writing or ciphering would look on these pages?"

"Not very well, I fear," she returned shrinking into herself. "I only wished to be of some use."

"Ah, well that is right," returned Tracey more graciously. "Have they had the sense to teach you how to use your needle?"

"Oh! yes. Germany is the place to learn needlework?" cried Claude eagerly. "We used to do a great deal—I can knit stockings and mend them and make my own underlinen."

"I am glad to hear it. Well, you shall mend my stockings! Tibbets has made them lumpy of late! My shirts are going too, you had better make me half a dozen—you can sit there by the fire while I write, and ply your needle. There is some sense in that!"

"Speaking of clothes," said Claude, colouring and evidently with an effort, "I am quite sorry to trouble you, but I am afraid I must ask for a new winter dress."

"A new dress!" echoed Tracey aghast. "Why what have you done with all the money I sent you since this time last year. Let me see—" hastily taking an account book out of a drawer in his writing

table. "Ay! here it is! five-seven-three-ten, two-five, one eighteen, two seven,—twenty-two pounds one and threepence halfpenny with postage! and you want more clothes," he closed the book, and gazed almost despairingly at her.

"Yes, it seems a great deal, I know," returned Claude in an unsteady voice. "But you see I was obliged to have two new summer frocks, and a waterproof for our expeditions into Saxon, Switzerland, and boots and things.—Oh! there are so many things a man can't know about, it makes me venture to suggest that it might worry you less if—if I had an allowance. I should try to do with very little, but it would be interesting to manage one's own money, and Aunt Selby thought it might he better——"

"Your Aunt Selby! Your Aunt Selby! What has she to do with it! What infernal extravagance is she putting you up to? Manage your own money, indeed! Pray what have you that you can call your own? Do you want to throw off my authority, to plunge me into debt—to——"

"No, no, my dear father!" exclaimed Claude fairly startled at the torrent she had set in motion, "I had no idea you would be angry. My cousins Kate and Mary have five and twenty pounds a year each for their dress, and they quite enjoy making it do, so I thought——"

"That I am as great a fool as Selby," interrupted her father. "You will find yourself mistaken. It is only people without a sixpence that throw away their money in this fashion. I have a little more to take care of than Major Selby. I can tell you I mean to do it!"

"Very well," returned Claude with outward composure that belied the sense of pain and indignation which made her heart swell as if it would burst. "I will never ask it again! I suppose you will allow me to have what is necessary in the way of clothes."

"Exactly! What is necessary! No more!" There was silence for a considerable time, it seemed to Claude. Then she rose quietly and was going out of the room when her father looked up from his writing and said abruptly: "If you want this dress, why, you must have it! Let me know what you require, but be careful not to ask too much."

"Thank you!" returned Claude bending her head.

"You had better ask Tibbets to give you some of my stockings, and let me see what you can do," continued her father.

"I shall do my best," said Claude, and she escaped from the room. "And this is home!" was the bitter thought that weighed on Claude's heart as she sat down in her own room to meditate and collect herself. That her father should refuse her first modest request would have been but a mild disappointment; it was the rough, angry, insulting tone of the refusal that overwhelmed her. It was a revelation. She had always feared and shrank from her father, but her idea of him hitherto had been that he was too cold and indifferent to feel or show anger. The effect of his rude outburst was to lessen fear, but to create disgust.

What right had any one, even a father, to oppress her with unjust wrath so insultingly expressed. Yet what a wretched, poverty-stricken existence his was! If she could make his life brighter and happier he

might be kinder, and at all events his passion about a trifle proved that he had human weakness to work upon. But what hard work it would be! Well, at any rate she would try!

Rather philosophic thought for nineteen, but Claude Tracey was much given to "commune with her heart;" this was rather the drift of her thoughts than distinctly defined reflection.

The result, however, was sufficient self-mastery to enable her to ask Mrs. Tibbets for a supply of stockings.

"Wouldn't you like a fire down here to work by?" asked that functionary.

"No, thank you. I will stay with my father."

"That is a good girl! You try and get in with him. He ought to be proud and fond of you—maybe he will be! He's not a man to play tricks with, but never let him see you are afraid of him."

"I fear I am—a little," said Claude taking a work-basket from the housekeeper. "I am dreadfully ashamed of myself for my weakness."

"Small blame to you!" said Tibbets, retreating towards the kitchen. "The lunch will be ready at half-past twelve, for the master wants to go out to the city."

"Will he go alone?" asked Claude. "He seems rather too infirm!"

"Oh! he wouldn't let mortal go with him, unless indeed it was Mr. Brandon!"

"Who is Mr. Brandon?"

"Oh, I don't know—except that he is the only creature your father gives bit or sup to. He dines here nigh once a week, and then there *is* a dinner."

"I am glad my father has one friend at all events."

Claude walked off, and established herself beside the small fire in her father's study.

He took no notice of her, and she darned diligently in silence until the frugal midday meal was served. Then Mr. Tracey was carefully muffled up, and armed with a stout umbrella, departed—having administered a sharp rebuke to Claude for suggesting a cab.

Virtue sometimes has its reward!

Uncle Selby arrived about half an hour after, and carried Claude off to look at a house he had seen, which he thought might suit his family. This was joy indeed. The sense of certainty as to the return of her only friends implied by "finding a house" filled poor Claude's soul with hope and courage. To be able to run in and consult Aunt Selby, to gossip with Kate and Janet was a delightful prospect!

Major Selby not being possessed of sixpence, according to Mr. Tracey, of course wished to take a cab to Westbourne Park, where the house in question was situated. But Claude sternly refused.

"We can walk quite well, uncle, and it will be much pleasanter; then we can judge how long it will take. *I* think it is a little too far away!" and Claude prevailed.

So they went off joyously on foot, talking most fully and freely as they went.

With what glee the congenial companions examined the dwelling, and distributed the rooms—there was even a tiny chamber where Claude might sleep, when the weather was too bad, or the hour too late for her to return home. Then the partition might be taken down between the drawing room and room behind it

—"making it quite large enough to give a dance in," said the Major, who was a hospitable soul.

So he paced the rooms, and measured spaces and made entries in wild handwriting much too large for his pocket-book. It was a very happy hour, winding up with tea at Whiteley's!

When dinner was over, Claude waited in vain for her father to ask what she had done or where she had been, during his absence. He sat staring at the fire, in silence, for what seemed to her a very long time—at last he roused himself with a shiver, and heaved a deep sigh.

"Bring me my blotting book and the inkstand, here by the fire. I am terribly cold!"

"I am afraid you have taken a chill," said Claude, as she rose to obey him. "Let Tibbets make you a hot drink to-night."

"Yes! Tell her,—I don't want to die just yet. I won't die till I have settled everything."

"My dear father, do not think of such sad things!"

The old man laughed, a curious cynical laugh, then putting on his spectacles looked over them at his daughter. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I am reading 'Die Ahnen,'—a German book Aunt Selby gave me."

"Ah! What has become of my stockings?"

"I have finished them, they did not want a great deal of mending"—then after waiting in vain for a reply she nerved herself to say: "Major Selby called soon after you went out and took me to see a house near Westbourne Grove, which he thinks might suit them!"

"Ha! and I suppose you drove there in style?"

"No, indeed, we walked there and back. It was very pleasant. I have been accustomed to walk a good deal."

"Hum—Westbourne Grove—glad it is no nearer. Remember I can't have a lot of rampageous young people racketing over my house! wearing out my carpets and playing the deuce."

"But my cousins are not rough. They have been very carefully brought up. If you are going to write, I will write too. I want to tell my aunt all about the house!"

"That means twopence halfpenny postage! Who is going to pay it?"

"*I* am this time! I have a few shillings left from the money I had when I left Dresden. Afterwards—well, I don't know. Suppose," smiling rather nervously, "you give me something for making your shirts?"

"Eh,—well—that's not such a bad idea! I wonder if you have any idea of the value of money."

"I think I have, it always seems scarce. I always want more than I get."

"That is a spendthrift's idea," remarked Mr. Tracey as if to himself, and he began to write.

Claude brought her own writing materials, and was soon deep in a voluminous epistle to her aunt—an occupation which carried her away from the present and its chilling discomforts. After the lapse of more than an hour, Mr. Tracey laid down his pen and leant back as if in thought; then he asked suddenly: "Have you any clothes?—clothes fit to be seen?"

"Yes, plenty! Why?"

"I thought you wanted a dress?"

"I want a warm winter dress!" returned Claude, blushing at the recollection of the painful passage between herself and her father that morning—"but I have summer things and one old winter dress."

"I have asked a friend to dinner to-morrow, and you must not appear in rags. Ah! girls *are* costly! So mind you look tidy!"

"I will try," returned Claude greatly surprised and rather pleased. "Is it a lady or a gentleman?"

"A lady! Do you think I would be troubled knowing ladies? Never mind who it is, you'll see to-morrow!"

"Very well," said Claude, and applying herself to her letter she did not address her father again during the dreary evening.

* * * * * * *

Seven o'clock was the dinner hour, and it had struck before Claude had left her room.

"Ain't you ready, Miss Claude?" exclaimed Tibbets, entering hastily. "Hurry up, like a dear! the master can't abide being kept waiting, and Mr. Brandon has come."

"I am ready. I didn't know it was so late."

"What's the matter with your eyes? They look as if you had been crying them out of your head?"

"Well, I have, almost," returned Claude with a sad smile. "I know it is weak and foolish, but to-day life really did not seem worth living! I shall be wiser to-morrow!"

"Now don't you give in like that! You'll have good times yet. Come along; dinner is dished, and as soon as you're safe in the study I'll tell 'im."

Claude gave a last despairing glance at the glass.

Her eyes certainly looked deplorable, but it did not matter; so she went down to the study (Mr. Tracey refused to occupy the drawing-room), a quaint little figure in a pale grey frock of soft, fine woollen stuff, open from the throat to the waist over a lace chemisette fastened at the side of the neck with a small delicate pink bow, and at the waist by a large one of the same tint. Elbow sleeves, with lace ruffles and fine black lace mittens, gave her the air of her grandmother's picture at the age of eighteen released from its frame and put in motion.

The surprise which waited her was indeed great.

With his back to the fire, talking to her father, who was sitting in his favourite chair, stood a gentleman who was almost young, as compared to the idea she had half unconsciously formed of her father's guest, a distinguished-looking man with that indescribable quiet air of perfect self-reliance peculiar to Englishmen of the "upper ten,"—admirably dressed, in the best possible style, he was a new type to Claude—though Uncle Selby, in his dress suit, was a striking figure in her estimation, albeit the suit was ancient—not to say slightly threadbare. As she entered, the magnificent personage before the fire stepped aside with an air of deference.

"This is my daughter!" said Mr. Tracey, in a tone suggestive of her not being worth many words.

Brandon bowed profoundly, and placed a chair for her as if she were a duchess.

"You have just returned from Germany, Mr. Tracey tells me," he said. "It is rather an unfortunate season in which to gather your first impressions of London!"

"I have often been in London! It is not strange to me," returned Claude, without raising her eyes.

"Ah! so much the better," began Brandon, when Tibbets opened the door and informed them that dinner was on the table.

"You had better take in the lady of the house," said Mr. Tracey with a disagreeable laugh. With a curious sense of being out of place Claude took Brandon's arm and went into the dining-room, Mr. Tracey following slowly.

The dinner, as usual, was good of its kind, though excessively simple, and for some part of the time it was eaten in silence. Then—having sent away his plate—Mr. Tracey, pointing to a china basket in which moss, ferns, and pale yellow chrysanthemums were prettily arranged, asked in a voice which expressed disapprobation—

"Where did that come from?"

"The basket always used to be in the drawing-room, and I got the flowers. A dinner looks so bare without flowers!"

"Yes, flowers have become a necessity," said Brandon. "I remarked the improvement immediately, and said to myself, it is evident the daughter of the house has returned."

Claude raised her eyes gratefully to him, and was startled by the steady gaze she encountered.

Brandon's eyes were fixed upon her as if he was studying her with the deepest interest, but as an object of curiosity.

"That is all very fine, but I am not going to pay for these nonsensical superfluities," said Mr. Tracey.

"Then we can have no more," remarked Claude in

a resigned tone. Brandon smiled, and wisely changed the subject.

"How long have you been in Germany?" he asked politely.

"Rather more than three years."

"I suppose you have become considerably Germanised in that time?"

"I think not. I like the Germans, but I would prefer living in England if——," she stopped.

"If you could keep living on with your dear uncle and aunt," put in Tracey.

"I should be very pleased to live with you," she paused again, and her father addressing Brandon said:

"Conditional mood, you see! Pray what is the condition, my dear?"

"I will tell you to-morrow,"—returned Claude plucking up spirit, while her cheek flushed and then grew white.

"What special line of art did you take up? Music or painting?" resumed Brandon. "I believe Dresden is nothing if not educational?"

"I studied music," said Claude.

"Then may we hope to hear you play or sing this evening."

"There is no piano," said Claude.

"I am sure Mr. Tracey will supply that deficiency. If there is any truth in the doctrines of Lavater, I should say Miss Tracey is a born musician."

"Mere guess work, Brandon. What good will strumming on a piano do?"

"Why! you would not let your daughter lose all she has learned and *you* have paid for?"

"Well! I'll see about it," and Mr. Tracey proceeded to ask some questions respecting the money market, which were Hebrew and Greek to Claude. She therefore soon stood up, intending to slip away unperceived. But Brandon immediately rose and opened the door, observing as she passed:

"I am very sorry there is no piano. I am fond of music."

"Then you would be disappointed in mine! I am but a beginner," and Claude escaped, to forget her troubles for a while in the fascinating pages of George Eliot, whose "Silas Marner" was among a few stray volumes which she found in a dusty bookcase, on a landing upstairs.

This friendship of her father for a man of Brandon's stamp was very puzzling to her. She had expected to see some shrivelled money-spinner, who shared her father's tastes and pursuits, and to whom she would be of less importance than a youthful puppy. But Brandon was a well-bred man of the world, who treated her with the deference due to the lady of the house, and spoke to her as to a rational being. Still his superiority in style and years, for he must be thirty or thirty-five, she thought, filled her with distrust, though she had too much self-respect to let her diffidence be seen.

It was a considerable time before the gentlemen joined her, but she was quite unconscious of the lapse of time.

"What are you studying with so much assiduity?" asked Brandon, drawing a chair beside the uncomfortable little horse-hair couch on which she sat.

Claude held out the book to him.

"Ah! Silas Marner! Rather a grave novel for a young lady!"

"It interests me," she returned.

"Well—to interest is the end and aim of novel writing. I suppose you are better read in German than English literature?"

"I am not well read in either," said Claude, with a sigh.

"Your time for reading is to come," resumed Brandon, "and you will have ample time here."

"No doubt, but not an ample supply of books!"

"I imagine not," said Brandon, with a smile, as if he appreciated the difficulties of her position. "If you will tell me of any books you would like to see, I may be able to procure them for you."

"You are very good," replied Claude, raising her eyes once more to his, and meeting them full and steadily.

"I have the honour of being a sufficiently intimate friend of your father to take the liberty of suggesting the purchase of a piano without loss of time."

"But he will not buy one!" said Claude, in a resigned tone.

"I have almost persuaded him!"

Claude did not reply. Her eyes sank and her colour rose. Why should her father do more for this stranger than for her—his only child? Brandon tried one or two more topics, but Claude gave him no encouragement to continue them. Then Mr. Tracey looked up from the evening paper which he had been studying with deep attention, and made some observation about the state of the funds, to which Brandon replied with evident interest and understanding—and for a

quarter of an hour or more the conversation soared or grovelled beyond Claude's ken.

At the end of this time Brandon took his leave, having arranged a meeting at his chambers with Mr. Tracey on the following afternoon.

After he had gone Tracey sat in thought for some minutes, his hands still holding the paper, but dropped over the arm of the chair. Claude, occupied by her own reflections on the remarkable difference between her father and his friend, waited for the former to break the silence before she wished him good-night. At length Mr. Tracey stirred. Taking off his spectacles deliberately he put them in their case.

"So you want a piano?" he said slowly, but not unkindly.

"I should like one very much, but if it is too costly I can do without it," said Claude, who was profoundly ignorant of her father's finances. Mrs. Selby, though she detested her brother-in-law, was too sensible and honourable to set his daughter against him by talking of his affairs.

"Ah!" was Mr. Tracey's only answer, but he looked at his daughter as if he were thinking of her. This encouraged Claude to say: "If it *does* suit you to give me a piano I could keep up my music. I should be sorry to get out of practice, for I worked rather hard, besides, if it were necessary I think I might give lessons."

"Lessons, eh!" returned Mr. Tracey with a grim smile, "that's your idea is it? Well, Brandon says I ought to buy one, so I had better, I suppose."

As her father seemed unusually mild, Claude ven-

tured to ask, "Why would you do this for Mr. Brandon, when you would have refused me?"

"Mr. Brandon is a man whose judgment I respect, you are an ignorant girl, who do not know what you want—still, I think you have inherited a little sense from me!"

"Thank you!" said Claude with a pleasant smile. She had a quiet but keen sense of humour. "I think I know what I want, father; you know my aunt is a great economist."

"Ay! but in wrong directions! Now what will this piano cost?"

"That I cannot tell! You might hire one——"

"Hire one! and after nearly paying for the thing let it slip through your fingers! No, no, I shall buy! Then, after use, I can get half my money back! You have false ideas altogether. Tell me," and he bent forward speaking with great earnestness, "do you think you *could* learn the value of money?"

"Of course I could!" said Claude in all sincerity, little thinking all her father meant by the expression. "I do know it, I have always been careful!"

"That is well! Now, good-night."

CHAPTER III.

LADY ELMSLIE.

"DEAR RALPH,

"If you have nothing better to do on Monday evening, look in about nine and take a cup of coffee with me. I cannot ask you to dinner, for I have no cook. I shall be in town for a day or two on my way to Paris. Lord Elmslie has invited a very objectionable set of men for the first week of the hunting season, so I leave the house to him and to them. Let me find a word in reply on my arrival to-morrow afternoon.

"Yours always,

"B. ELMSLIE."

This was one of the various notes and letters which awaited Brandon when he came in to breakfast the morning but one after his dinner with Mr. Tracey. He put it aside when he had glanced at it and proceeded to open and read the others, some of which he tore up, while others he folded neatly lengthways, and put under a weight on his writing-table. Having breakfasted and read those parts of the morning papers which most concerned him, he again took up the note and read it over.

"It is curious that she should pass through London just now. Perhaps it is lucky too. She is shrewd, and certainly seems to interest herself in my affairs!

Curious woman! Can any man ever know, really know a woman who escapes from the ordinary grooves, in which the majority of their sex live and move and have their being?" he thought, as he rapidly traced a few lines accepting the invitation, which he directed to "Lady Elmslie, Stanhope Street, Mayfair."

Then he proceeded to write rapidly, pausing now and then to reflect, as he laid aside page after page of MS. in a neat pile, finally fastening them together with a clip, when he varied his occupation by writing answers to some of the letters he had received that morning. By noon he had accomplished a good morning's work, and had risen from his chair as if expecting some one or something, when a telegram was handed to him:

"*Dare not go out; come to me.* TRACEY."

"Rather a nuisance," was his mental comment. "But the weather *is* beastly, and if he caught a chill he might go off the hooks a little too soon for my plans. What a struggle it must have been to send this telegram! I had better go at once, and then I can be in time for my other appointments." In a few minutes Brandon left his rooms, and hailing a hansom directed the driver, to Lichfield Terrace, where he paid a lengthened visit. He came forth charged with sundry errands for the querulous invalid.

These, with his own affairs, made the afternoon a busy one. Yet before dining he dressed carefully, and having quickly got through his meal he managed to reach Stanhope Street at the time appointed.

It was a fine house, evidently uninhabited at

present. The gas over the entrance door was the only light visible, the front façade looking like a giant with his eyes put out.

A gentlemanlike looking man out of livery opened the door and at once admitted Brandon, whom he evidently knew.

"Her ladyship is in the library, sir," he said, as he took the visitor's hat and coat, and led the way down the wide hall to a door on the left, which admitted to a handsome room lined with books; a large fire glowed in the grate and partially lit the room; beside it, on a long, low couch covered with dark red plush, sat a lady, who was reading by the soft light of a large standard lamp, still further softened by a pale gold-coloured shade of silk and lace. Busts, vases, portfolio-stands, all the luxurious accessories which wealth can bestow, beautified the apartment. As the servant announced "Mr. Brandon," the lady rose and moved a step or two forward to meet him. A tall, stately figure clad in a long tea-gown of warm brown velvet, edged with sable, the front of embroidered yellow crèpe de chine, and a small cap of fine lace with a tuft of yellow ribbon perched on the rich rolls of the wavy bronze-coloured hair that crowned her small, well-placed head. She was a splendid, richly-coloured brunette, with grand, flashing dark eyes, and brilliant, pearly teeth revealed by the smile with which she greeted her guest.

"So glad to see you!" she said in a deep but pleasant voice. "I was more than half afraid you would be out of town!"

"Even so," said Brandon as he took the long, slender hand she extended to him. "Had you but

given me timely notice I should have returned! Do you suppose I would willingly miss a chance of seeing you?"

"I don't know," she said dreamily, "I don't know." She returned to her sofa, and Brandon drew a chair beside a small table which stood in front of the fire.

"This is rather an unexpected move of yours?" he said.

"No! no move of mine can be unexpected! It was only a few days ago that Elmslie told me who were the men he had invited. Then I told him I could not stay."

"Rather a nuisance travelling just now."

"I do not mind it. Paris is rather pleasant at this season. I have milliners and dressmakers to interview. Then my own set will come to Ravenscourt early in December. I hope you will be amongst the number!"

"Thank you! I should like to run down for a few days if I can get away."

"You are a busy man, Ralph," she returned, opening a large feather fan which she held between herself and the light.

"Yes, rather! I wish my diligence produced more fruit. But impatience is contemptible. Tell me of yourself. How have you been all these long weeks?"

"Just as usual! quite well so long as I am amused or excited. More or less miserable when left to myself. Then I am really uneasy about Elmslie. He drinks too much. I don't mean to say he gets seriously drunk, but he is rarely quite sober in the even-

ing. Worse still, he gambles. I know he does! Should he succeed in impoverishing himself *and* me, I shall finish up with a large dose of chloroform. Poverty is the one thing I will not bear! *You* know all I sacrificed to avoid it!"

"I do," said Brandon quietly, and there was a pause, during which coffee was brought in.

"When I return and get some hunting it will set me up," said Lady Elmslie when the servant left the room. "After all, *is* life worth living?"

"At one time I certainly thought it was not," he replied with a slight smile. "But I have changed my mind. It may not be exhilarating, but the struggle is bracing, and I should like to accomplish one or two things before I die."

"Your coldness gives you strength! How changed you are, Ralph!"

"Well, yes, I hope so. I am much more comfortable than during the feverish period of my rather inflammable youth!"

"But can it be comfortable, this semi-vitality?"

"I assure you I have quite enough vitality for all reasonable purposes."

Lady Elmslie made no reply. She played with the feathers of her fan, looking down, so that her fine eyes were veiled, while Brandon took his coffee.

"Now tell me," returned Lady Elmslie in an ordinary tone, "what have *you* been doing?"

"Writing a good deal and speculating a little—also I have received a proposal about which I should like to consult you!"

"What kind of proposal?" asked Lady Elmslie, laying down her fan with an air of interest.

"A proposal of marriage."

"Who in the world has proposed for you, Ralph?" she asked with a burst of merry laughter.

"Well, an old gentleman! Don't laugh, though it sounds very funny. Did you ever hear me speak of a Mr. Tracey?"

"I can't exactly remember. I seem to know the name. There are Traceys in Lancashire, fairly well-born people, I believe."

"Yes, my old friend is a Lancashire man. He is a sort of remote connection of mine. It is too long a story to tell you how I fell in with him. I had the luck to do him a small service, and he took a fancy to me because he thought I had miserly instincts like his own. He *is* a miser. He does not actually deprive himself of food and fire, but he has lost his mental balance considerably on the subject of money. Well, this old man has a daughter, his only child. He dreads trusting her with his money, so he has asked me to accept both."

"Indeed!" said Lady Elmslie, growing very grave, her eyes seeking his with a degree of eagerness which showed the depth of her friendly interest. "Are you *sure* this man is rich?"

"I *am* sure! I know to a certainty that he possesses a large amount of safely invested money and he may have double the amount in other securities. He is winding up his business rapidly, as he fears he hasn't the strength to inspect the working of it himself."

"And what did you say to his proposition?"

"Oh! I spoke with brutal candour. I said I should like his money, but I was not sure about his daughter.

This is perfectly true. To me a wife would be a great bore. I have a few weaknesses left, and I should not like to behave badly to a woman. Nor would I marry a distinctly unpresentable girl, and give people the right to say Brandon had sold himself! I would give no answer till I saw the young lady."

"*Have* you seen her?" in a low voice.

"Yes, I dined with old Tracey on Saturday, and was duly presented to the heiress presumptive."

"And what is she like?"

"First—and last—she is inoffensive; she has no style, of course, she is rather colourless, but she looks like a gentlewoman, and she has a soft, sweet voice."

"So far, good! Do you think she would answer?"

"Can't possibly say! She may be a little devil under it all. My old friend is in a desperate hurry to have the matter settled, but that can't be. The young lady must be treated with due respect; poor little soul! she must have a miserable time of it. Old Tracey is a bit of a bear. His daughter sings and plays, and he hesitates to give her a piano. She has neither amusement nor occupation!"

"Ah! Ralph, pity is akin to love!" said Lady Elmslie, shifting her position and taking up her fan again.

"Love! Oh! that is over for me! Even if it were *not*, this poor, pale, silent child is not likely to stir the dry bones of what is at present dead! But she will have a splendid dowry I imagine, and——" he paused.

"If you make love to her, Ralph, you will develop her soul!—you will breathe new life into her veins!"

"I would rather not! Make love to her? I could

not be such a contemptible sham! If I thought she would be 'content to dwell in decencies for ever,' I might venture! But suppose she wanted tenderness and sympathy and all the very young dream about. Why, her life with me would kill her! Besides, I am greedy for money, it is true; still, ought a *gentleman* to fill his pockets with his wife's fortune, and then when she asks for bread give her a stone?"

Lady Elmslie was silent for a few moments. Then she said coldly: "I suppose you know what you want! I should not have imagined you were the kind of man to throw away substance for shadow—the shadow of sentimentality. If you can do without this girl's money, why, let her go. Marriage is by no means a blissful condition. *If* her fortune is essential to your career, grasp it while you can! Why trouble about her? You will be a far better husband than most, even of those who go to the altar in a fine frenzy of love. You will be civil and just, and a young creature such as you describe will ask no more. She will not know there is anything more to have."

"Probably you are right. I feel I am rather weak. I certainly want the money. Then old Tracey, if I, —if his daughter and I go against him, is quite capable of leaving his money away from us. Not to charities, however, I am quite sure;" and he laughed. "Do you know, I should like you to see this girl! You are a good judge of character, or I should not ask you. You have an instinct for divining character."

"Yes, I should like to see her," returned Lady Elmslie slowly.

"If I marry her, your friendship would be of infinite use to us both. She would need your guidance

through the shoals and quicksands of society. So when you return——"

"When I return," repeated Lady Elmslie rising and coming over to the fireplace. "Why, you will have either crossed the Rubicon—or fallen back on your base of operations." She leant her elbow on the mantel-shelf, and turned to look at him, the firelight gleaming in the liquid depths of her dark eyes.

"You are very good, Lady Elmslie!—but how is the visit to be managed? You leave to-morrow?"

"I need not go to-morrow. But even if I do not leave till Wednesday, it would be rather abrupt to go and call on the young lady, still more so to ask her here."

"I do not think she knows much about etiquette, but we must not be precipitate, and I must manage the father. He is a man incapable of understanding the value of such an acquaintance for his daughter."

"That is of little consequence. You want his money. He wants you to have it. If the daughter is inoffensive and unexacting, why, it may be a good thing for you. However, no precaution can prevent its being a leap in the dark. There is no telling into what these silent chits may develop."

"Well, nothing venture, nothing have! I will write to Tracey to-night proposing to bring an old and valued friend of mine to call on his daughter, if he has no objection. Really you are a beneficent fairy, my dear Lady Elmslie. You add enormously to the weight of obligation you have already laid upon me."

"I hope you do not feel it a weight! I have always been and always will be glad to help you if I can!

Well, I shall not start till Wednesday night or Thursday morning—then you shall know my verdict! Though all this hesitation and examination commits you a good deal——"

"That cannot be helped. Still, I feel I am drifting——"

"You were not made to drift," said Lady Elmslie, with a deep sigh. "Tell me of your work. Have you seen S—— lately?" naming the private secretary of a great politician.

"Yes, we had a long talk together last week, when he was passing through——;" and the conversation turned on political topics.

Lady Elmslie was a little preoccupied, which Brandon perhaps perceiving, he rose to wish her good-night.

"What are you going to do with yourself to-morrow?" he asked.

"Oh! to-morrow. I am going to buy various things for my own rooms at Ravenscourt."

"Well, and in the evening? Suppose you dine with me at —— and go to the Lyceum after?"

"Yes, I shall be very glad to get away from myself and to be with you. Then you can let me know what is settled about my visit to Miss Tracey. It is a curious eddy in the stream of life that whirls me round to sit in judgment on your future wife, Ralph;" and she smiled a peculiar smile.

"It is indeed!—a friendly eddy! There could not be a kinder or more capable judge than yourself!"

"Ah! Flatterer! Good-night!"

When he was gone Lady Elmslie drew a low deep chair to the fire, and sat long in profound thought. At

last she roused herself. "As well her as another," she murmured to herself. "I shall be able to judge when I see her."

* * * * *

The object of this consultation was meantime growing somewhat accustomed to the lifeless monotony of her home, strengthened and upheld as she was by the near prospect of her aunt's arrival. That lady was coming over the following week, to select and furnish a house, leaving her daughters *en pension* with a friend.

What quantities of beautiful time was slipping away, thought Claude, as she looked longingly at the pile of music which lay on her empty box. What delightful hours of practice she might enjoy if only she had that piano her father spoke of. She had not ventured to mention the subject, though Mr. Tracey had softened the terrors of his speech and presence. He had pronounced his daughter's darning "very good," and had accepted her offer of knitting him some specially soft warm pairs of stockings graciously—nay, more, he had given her money to buy the wool—and added (after private consultation and altercation with Tibbets) a splendid gift of three pounds, wherewith to buy what he termed "a gown."

Claude was very thankful to have it, however, and only waited to secure her uncle's escort in order to make the purchase. "If you will help me, Tibbets dear, I can make it myself, then I can get quite nice stuff and trimming."

"You can do so, Miss Claude! and I'll run all the seams for you."

Comforted by the hope that she was making a

little way with her father and not knowing the adamantine texture of the material she had to deal with, Claude had spent a comparatively happy evening, reading and knitting, rather to her father's surprise. Indeed, he expressed his tolerance of reading under such conditions. Finally he had told her she might read to him, as his eyes ached.

She willingly obeyed, and toiled through some dry articles on commerce and foreign affairs which might affect the stocks more or less. This was some advance towards bridging the gulf which seemed to yawn between her father and herself when she first arrived.

Mr. Tracey was a little later than usual next morning. He had been kept awake by his cough he said, and Claude was quite sorry to see how ill he looked.

She hastened to pour out his cocoa, and hand him his egg, but several letters first claimed his attention. One, which he opened first and put aside, he took up again and read it over while he stirred his cocoa.

"This is from Brandon," he said at length. "He proposes to bring a lady to see you to-morrow, if it is agreeable to you and to me. It seems she is an old friend of his, and he thinks she may be an agreeable acquaintance for you. I do not see what you want with these sort of acquaintances. *I* don't want them. There! read his note."

Claude obeyed. "He is very kind," she said, when she had finished. "It is impossible to refuse, I suppose, but if his friend is a great lady I would rather she did not come."

"Well, it is your affair. *I* will not see her, so you must have her in the drawing-room, I suppose."

"Even with a fire, how terribly cold it will be after being fireless for months!" and she shivered at the thought.

"Pray what do you want? Do you wish to start a big fire now?"

"Oh, no, I will ask Tibbets to light one early to-morrow morning."

"You had better write to Brandon yourself. I have no time for this kind of nonsense."

"Very well," said Claude rather reluctantly. She wanted to go out with Uncle Selby to-morrow to buy that winter dress without delay. Nevertheless, she wrote a nice little note, thanking Brandon, and promising to be at home all day so that Lady Elmslie might call at any hour that was most convenient to herself. Then she sat discussing with herself the various aspects of the promised visit. In truth she rather shrank from it. The surface timidity of her nature was rebuked by the deep undercurrent of pride which underlay it. Why need she fear any one? If she kept her own place, asking nothing that was not her due, what was the grandeur or the lowliness of others to her? And why did Mr. Brandon take so much trouble on her account? Friendship for her father was of course his ruling motive.

Then again she was vexed with herself for feeling some awe of Brandon. Why should he seem grander and greater than Uncle Selby, who was a soldier and a gentleman? True, she was familiar with Uncle Selby, who had been like a father to her for some years. Still, she admitted that even in the very borderland of early acquaintance her uncle could never have been formidable. With Mr. Brandon she

could not imagine any one becoming intimate, he seemed so perfectly sufficient to himself. Yet he was very kind and considerate. He would be an admirable ally to help her with her father, and he was going to procure her a piano. She would then take the goods the gods provided, and trouble herself no more about Mr. Brandon—only she did wish this visit was over.

Mrs. Tibbets was mightily moved when she was informed that she must put a fire in the drawing-room next day, because a real live ladyship was coming to see her young lady.

"Ay, that I will. It's a shame that you should be shut up here, with never a visitor from week's end to week's end, instead of having real carriage company by the dozen."

"Why, Tibbets, I have hardly been at home a week."

"Well, and if you were here a year it would be the same, unless a gentleman like Mr. Brandon—a real gentleman—brought some of the right sort to call. Don't you fear, Miss Claude! I'll be up at cockcrow to-morrow morning, and light a rousing fire."

The room had time to get warm, for Lady Elmslie did not make her appearance till about four o'clock, and, rather to Claude's regret, she came alone.

The heart of Tibbets rejoiced when she saw an exceedingly neat, well-appointed brougham drawn by a splendid horse draw up to the door. She hastened to open it, and ushered Lady Elmslie into the sparely-furnished drawing-room where Claude had established herself.

It was a vision of beauty and magnificence which

burst upon the young lady of the house when her visitor entered: a long close-fitting coat of black brocaded velvet trimmed with rich dark fur, a small bonnet with crimson ostrich tips, a lace veil enhanced the beauty of the face beneath it, the soft yet brilliant complexion, lustrous eyes, and smiling deep red lips parting to show the pearly white teeth that made her smile so radiant.

Claude was greatly surprised: she had pictured Lady Elmslie as cold, rigid, elderly and condescending to the insignificant child in whom Mr. Brandon deigned to interest himself. She could hardly speak when this still young and beautiful woman, taking her chill hand in her own, delicately gloved and warm from the recesses of her muff, said in a sweet full voice, "It was so nice of you to let me come at my own time, my dear Miss Tracey, for I had a hundred and one things to do this morning. I am very pleased to know you! Mr. Brandon tells me your father is quite an old friend of his."

"Thank you! I am very pleased to see you!" returned Claude, charmed, yet a little overwhelmed. "Pray sit down near the fire!"

"Mr. Brandon tells me you are anxious to get a piano," said Lady Elmslie after exchanging a few ordinary phrases. "It must be frightfully dreary for a young creature like you to be here alone. Mr. Tracey is, I regret to hear, an invalid."

"Yes, he is far from strong, but I hope to nurse him well this winter, so perhaps——"

"Ah, yes, a daughter's care and all that! You do not look very strong yourself."

"Oh, I am always well. It is of course rather dull

here, after living with my cousins who are about my own age, and all the excitement of study."

"Ah, indeed, how you must miss them."

"I am happy to say they are coming to settle in London."

"Very nice for you. Are they all girls?

"There is one boy, who is in an office in the city."

"Ah! A pennyworth of bread to all this sack?"

Claude looked at her puzzled,

"You will think me a barbarian," said Lady Elmslie with a laugh. "But I am quite afflicted by the preponderance of girls over boys."

"Are there more girls than boys?" asked Claude.

"Oh, yes, ever so many more. Tell me, are you an enthusiast for music?"

"For hearing it, yes. I know enough to know I have no genius of my own, but I can enjoy the performance of others."

"That is something. Mr. Brandon is a great lover of music."

"Indeed!" said Claude indifferently.

"Oh, yes, unsympathetic as he seems, he is very much alive to the concord of sweet sounds. Have you seen much of him?"

"I have never seen him but once. He has been very good in persuading my father to let me have a piano."

"How very bad of a millionaire like Mr. Tracey to dream of refusing so small an indulgence," cried Lady Elmslie laughing.

"You are mistaken, my father is no millionaire."

"Then he is very much belied! Now suppose you

put on your things and come with me to choose a piano?"

Claude felt as if her breath was taken away.

"I could not do so without asking my father; and I am afraid he would be displeased."

"Is he in the house?"

"Yes, he is in the study."

"Then pray go and say I am here, and ready to go with you. *Or* let me go and see him; I will soon settle it."

"Oh, no, Lady Elmslie, I dare not let you see him! But I will go and speak to him myself. I should be very glad to get the piano as soon as possible—but I am afraid——"

With this disjointed sentence Claude hastily left the room and went to Mr. Tracey in his retreat. He was dozing over the fire.

"My dear father, Lady Elmslie wants me to go with her at once to choose a piano."

"What!" in a piercing tone, "she must be mad. Do you know what a piano costs?"

"Not exactly; but a great deal of money, I know. I don't want to get one all at once in this way."

"Hey, well, say I am going to choose one myself for you, and get rid of her."

"Lady Elmslie wishes to see *you*, father."

"*Me!*" almost screamed Mr. Tracey. "Say I am quite unfit to see any one—get rid of her, get rid of her as soon as you can."

Dreadfully puzzled how to obey this command, Claude went back to her visitor.

"I am so sorry! My father seems very unwell to-day and begs you will excuse him. He—he thinks

he should like to choose a piano with me—I imagine" blushing and smiling, "he fears I should be extravagant—but indeed I should not."

"Which is a great mistake, my dear Miss Tracey," cried Lady Elmslie. "If you have anything to do with persons who are inclined to overestimate the value of money always buy the most expensive things, they find it quite as painful to part with a small sum as a large one, and you may as well have the benefit. I fear I am taking a great liberty in speaking so frankly, but I have gathered that Mr. Tracey's solitary life and the absence of other interests have driven him in upon finance for an object. It is a most ordinary case; men are all nearly alike—after a certain age. Your society will no doubt work a radical cure."

"Yes; I hope my father will grow to understand and love me," said Claude frankly. "He has been too much alone."

"Pray keep him up to the piano point," resumed Lady Elmslie, with a pleasant laugh. "Remember, in such matters every step lost is the forerunner of further defeat, and though men are vexed at being beaten, they (even fathers) value you infinitely more for winning."

"I do not think that my father would."

"Try," said Lady Elmslie emphatically. Then she changed the subject. She asked Claude many leading questions about her life in Germany, about her studies, about her impressions, showing her own familiarity with various topics—all this in the most pleasant, friendly way imaginable. Claude was greatly struck with her charm of manner, but a little overawed also.

At last she rose to take leave. "I have paid you an unconscionably long visit," she said. "I can only hope you will return it in kind. When I came back from Paris, I was willing and ready to be of any use I could to you, for Ralph Brandon's sake. Now I have had the pleasure of seeing you, I am still more willing for your own sake. There is my card:—I will let you know when I return. You shall come to lunch with me, and we will make some little plans. You really *must* not be left to blush unseen in these wilds!"

"How good you are to me!" cried Claude, warmed out of her shyness. "It will be a great pleasure for me to go and see you."

So they parted most cordially, the grand, beautiful lady being wafted to her native and exalted regions, if not in a chariot of fire, at least in a brougham with a fiery steed.

Finally Brandon proposed to escort Claude to Broadwood's great institution—a suggestion which met Mr. Tracey's approval and almost reconciled him to the prospective outlay. Things were evidently progressing in a right direction, and if all this trifling was waste of time and money, it might after all be necessary—especially when a silly girl was in the case.

It was a tremendous and somewhat terrible undertaking to go alone with Brandon to choose a piano, as he proposed. She felt it was a gracious and a friendly action on his part, but oh! the difficulty of finding conversation with him! She had plenty to say to Uncle Selby and all the boys she knew in Dresden, but something in Brandon paralysed her brain,

probably because conversation was evidently an effort to him.

The incidents of the little journey, the terrors of a hansom which Claude sustained gallantly, though her companion perceived her alarm,—these in some degree broke down the barrier of reserve, and by the time a piano had been chosen and they left the warehouse in Soho Square they were more at ease with each other.

Returning to Oxford Street, Brandon paused, looking about for a four-wheeler, as he wished to spare his young companion the trial of a second drive in a hansom, when a young man, distinguished, though somewhat "horsey" in aspect, suddenly slapped him on the shoulder: "Why, Ralph! what brings you here at this hour, far from the city's 'madding crowd' or your daily task of enlightening the world?"

While he said this, his eyes rested with keen curiosity on Claude.

"Ah! Philip, I thought you were at Fairford," returned Brandon, making a movement to pass him.

"Just come up for a day or two to see some pictures there are on view close to this. Come and have a look at them!"

"Not to-day; I'm engaged; I must see this lady home."

"What's up?" asked the other in a low tone, as Claude turned away to look into a shop window. "Have you adopted an orphan?"

"Not exactly; I cannot stop now."

"Dine with me this evening at the Club, eight sharp, for I want to consult you about one or two things."

"Very well, I'll come. Hi! four-wheeler! Now, Miss Tracey, if you are ready."

Brandon's friend stepped back and raised his hat as Claude passed.

Once underweigh the rattle of the cab compelled silence, and in her delightful anticipation of long practicings and new music, Claude forgot all about this encounter.

CHAPTER IV.

SIR PHILIP BRANDON.

An exceedingly busy afternoon had driven his expedition with Claude out of Brandon's head, and made him a little late for dinner.

He found his host and cousin Sir Philip Brandon waiting for him. Although this young man had been the long suppressed son of his uncle, and had barred Ralph's succession to the family estates, and had been the cause of the rupture with his fiancée, they had become friends.

Philip was a man of some ability, with gleams of common sense which struggled occasionally against the animal tendencies of a somewhat earthly nature. His mother had been a very handsome woman of humble birth but fairly good character, who was perfectly content to live in obscurity so long as she was sure of being a lawful wife. The late baronet had given his son a good education, so that he was in some measure prepared for the position which awaited him; but he lacked social training, having led a rather retired life, save during a few years when he had been placed in a French family. On succeeding to the title and property his first impulse was to make acquaintance with the relative he had ousted. Ralph Brandon was a man well known and well received in the best society; his friendly aid and counsels would be

of infinite advantage to a beginner like Sir Philip; besides, the young man sympathised with the disappointment he had involuntarily caused.

He therefore called on his cousin, and expressed in a manly, straightforward way his regret that, in taking his own, he had been obliged to rob him of his hopes, and asked Ralph if in spite of their opposing interests they could not be friends. Ralph was far too much a man of the world to reject these advances, though at the time he was quivering with pain and mortification at the ruin of his expectations and the desertion of the girl whom he loved with all the passion of a strong nature. But he pulled himself together. Resisting the desire to fly from society, he faced the foe gallantly and posed very effectively as the sponsor of the man who had supplanted him.

It is not difficult to give currency to a good-looking young baronet with £20,000 a year; so Sir Philip Brandon was soon able to dispense with his cousin's help, but he continued to seek his society, having formed a strong liking for him and a profound belief in his judgment. In return Ralph Brandon endured him.

From this as well as many other small annoyances Ralph Brandon was delivered by the opportune offer of a private secretaryship from a nobleman, who was going out as governor of one of our great Indian provinces. Here Brandon passed some very profitable years, after which he travelled a good deal on the less beaten tracks of Eastern wayfarers. The papers on India which he contributed to the graver reviews and periodicals during this period gave him a good position among editors, and raised in him a

desire for solid success, which restored vitality to his half-numbed spirit.

It had vexed him curiously, the encounter with Sir Philip that morning; his look and laugh dwelt in his memory and irritated him; already he was sensitive respecting his future wife, and annoyed that such a man as Philip Brandon could for a moment imagine that he was capable of carrying on even a flirtation *sub rosa* with a simple, common-place girl.

He had accepted his cousin's invitation with the intention of clearing up matters if an opportunity offered. It would be an operation requiring some skill, but he thought he could manage it.

"Why, Ralph, you are absolutely ten minutes late! This is unprecedented!" cried Sir Philip as he shook hands with his cousin. "I am starving! Dinner as fast as you can," he cried to a waiter, and they sat down.

"I suspect you have had a long and happy day, Ralph," said the host when the soup had been removed, and he fixed his laughing eyes on Brandon.

"A long one, but rather fatiguing," he returned. "I was rambling about the city most of the afternoon and missed the very men I most wanted to see."

The word "city" started Sir Philip on a new line of thought.

"Ah, by the way, you know all sorts of rich chaps. Do you think you could find some fellow who would like to buy Oatlands?"

"Buy Oatlands! Why, do you want to sell? It is one of the best farms on your property!"

"Because there is a capital house on it, and a garden, and it will bring a good price."

"I am sorry to hear it in every way," said Brandon. "You must want money if you think of selling. Take care how you commence that style of replenishing."

"My dear fellow, the longer one lives the more one wants. The way in which money flies is amazing. I am not half as extravagant as other men, and if I borrow, why, interest runs away with one's income."

"Have you been borrowing too?"

"Yes, I have, but not much. No, really!"

"Why don't you borrow on Oatlands instead of selling it? Then put aside half your income to accumulate? You'd clear yourself in a very few years—at least, I hope so!"

"Oh, nonsense! I shall go in for a rich wife. They are to be had for the asking."

Brandon smiled. "Don't be too sure," he said.

"Oh, I do not think I should find it so difficult. I'm not a bad-looking fellow, I've a handle to my name, and a good property. They say Old Lady Scamperton keeps a list of all the available heiresses, and will introduce and back fellows up for a consideration."

"Do you believe that?"

"I don't know. At any rate, I don't think I shall want her help. But you have got through a pretty pile yourself, if you are not very much belied."

"Yes; I was as great an idiot as my neighbours. That is the reason I am so vexed to see you following my bad example."

"Oh, well, don't trouble about me, I shall manage all right. Now tell me where were you going with that demure damsel this morning, and who is she?"

"She is the daughter of a crotchety old acquaintance of mine. She has just returned from school abroad, and at her father's request I went with her to choose a piano. She has no mother, but Lady Elmslie is good enough to say she will introduce her next spring."

"Oh, does she?" said Sir Philip in an altered tone. "I could not make out what you were up to when I met you at that ungodly hour. I suppose it is to please *you* that Lady Elmslie undertakes the young lady. She does not look much like her style, but she has a deuced good pair of eyes of her own."

"Well, I daresay you will have a chance of seeing them occasionally next season."

The conversation then took a different turn.

"I am going out of town to-morrow," said Sir [illegible] as Brandon was taking leave. "Wish you could come down with me. I'll put you up and give you a mount. A few days' hunting would do you no end of good!"

"Thank you, I have no doubt it would, but unfortunately I can't leave town."

"Well, come at Christmas, if you will not come now; it may not be so jolly next year. The bachelor days are numbered there. I can tell you! I am going in seriously for matrimony, reform, and recuperation."

"I wish you well in all three," said Brandon, laughing. "It is a tremendous speculation."

"Why don't you have a try at the game yourself, Ralph? I fancy you are the sort of fellow who would get on with women."

"You were never more mistaken in your life!"

"Well, then, good-night! I'll look you up when I'm next in town!" and they parted,

"That fellow is as deep as a well," mused Sir Philip as he strolled into the smoking-room of his club. "Then, he is perfectly straight: who can that little girl be, and why does he trouble about her? Gad! I'd take long odds that she is some obscure millionaire's daughter! He does not care a rap about women, and if he did, that's not the sort to attract! I'd like to run Master Ralph to earth—not to interfere with him."

Meanwhile Brandon walked quickly towards his chambers in J—— Street, through the crisp frosty air. "I think I have thrown that booby off the scent," he said to himself. "Even if I did not intend to make Claude Tracey my wife, I feel interest enough in her to preserve her from idle curiosity if I could. She is a gentle, delicate little soul, and probably deserves a better fate than to be married to me. However, I hope she is one of those placid unemotional women who wants nothing beyond tranquillity, and a comfortable home, yet there was something like character in her control of her own fear! I wish the worry of proposing for her was over: as to making love, I could not degrade myself by such a sham. Lady Elmslie gave me sound advice; I think I can act on the lines she laid down. After all Claude will be better off with me than with most fortune-hunters,—poor child! she little knows she has been offered to me and conditionally accepted. I must go through with it though," he concluded as he put his key into the door of his rooms, and he at once sat down and wrote to Mr.

Tracey, asking permission to dine with him on the next day but one.

The arrival of the piano was quite an event, and better still, in Claude's estimation, her father seemed quite reconciled to the purchase. She had been so pleased and excited on her return home on that memorable day that she ventured to talk more than usual to him, and spoke with so much gratitude of Brandon's kind help that he naturally concluded all was going well for his plans.

Claude, anxious to keep her rather rugged parent in good humour, told him she could wrap herself in her travelling cloak and practise without a fire, a bit of complaisance for which Tibbets sharply reproved her, stating her own determination to light one there every day.

It was new life to the lonely girl to sing and play and forget herself in the "concord of sweet sounds," but she found she had less time for this recreation than she expected, for her father found that she could be of more use than he anticipated, and, in short, was growing reconciled to her presence.

It was with great satisfaction that Claude penned a reply to Brandon's note. Perhaps he really liked music; if so, what joy to have a sympathetic listener!

Claude was too free from all self-consciousness to suffer from *mauvaise honte*, especially when she was deeply in earnest, as she always was about music.

The day had been drizzling and cold, with a keen east wind which penetrated even better built walls than those of London suburban houses, and Mr. Tracey's cough was more troublesome, so Claude contented

herself by sending a note to Mrs. Selby to account for her non-appearance, and kept indoors reading and writing for her father the greater part of it. When Brandon came he felt that he was received with friendliness and increased composure, which augured well for the future.

Mr. Tracey spoke very little at dinner, but Brandon tried to interest him in some political questions which bore upon commercial interests.

"You will play to me, will you not?" asked Brandon as soon as the cloth was removed.

"Yes, with pleasure."

Mr. Tracey said he didn't want to move, he felt chilled and weary.

"If you are tired you must stop me," said Claude as she opened the piano; "I am apt to go on and on. As you are my father's closest, almost only friend, you must not be too formal with me," she added shyly, yet frankly, with a smiling glance in her candid eyes.

"I shall be brutally informal if you wish," he returned. "I am going to sit at a distance in this comfortable chair to enjoy myself, and not worry you by turning over at the wrong place."

"Thank you. That is much wiser."

Claude only played her old favourites and needed no music book. Brandon was surprised by the delicacy and firmness of her touch, the living expression she drew from wood and wire. She played nocturnes and dreamy schlummerlieds, wild sad Russian airs and spirited old Scotch ones; and though she performed no gymnastics, Brandon could see that she had improved natural ability by close study.

"Are you not tired yet?" she asked at length, turning to look at him.

"No, by no means; your music is quite beyond the average. But do you not sing?"

"Yes, I enjoy singing, but I have very little voice."

"You will let me hear it?"

With a smile and a nod she turned to the piano again and sung a well-known "Volks Lied." Her voice was not strong, but liquidly sweet and perfectly sympathetic.

"Another! pray sing another!" was Brandon's only comment; so she sang again and yet again.

"I am so glad you like music!" she cried. "I will always play and sing for you when you come."

"Then I shall come too often."

"Oh! no, indeed, you cannot! Think of the comfort you are to my father; remember how lonely I am. It is very good of you to come."

"There is not a spark of coquetry in her," thought Brandon, noting her unconscious, unembarrassed manner.

"I am rather a grave and reverend signor to be the chum of so young a lady."

"A chum! Well, no, I don't suppose you could ever look on me as a chum, but I should be very glad if you would consider me a friend for my father's sake."

"Yes, I will, and for your own sake too."

Further conversation was arrested by the hasty entrance of Mrs. Tibbets with a wild look of terror in her face and outstretched arms.

"Lord ha' mercy upon us! Miss Claude dear, come along quick! The master's just dying! He has coughed until he has burst a blood-vessel!"

At these words Claude flew to the study, where she found her father a ghastly spectacle lying back in his chair, lividly pale, his eyes closed, and the front of his shirt and coat covered with blood which had streamed from his mouth.

Claude shrank back appalled.

"Is he dead?" she whispered to Brandon, who had followed her closely.

"No, certainly not; do not lose your head. I will go for a doctor; meantime, give him the juice of a lemon and send for ice. Have you any doctor in the neighbourhood?" asked Brandon.

"None ever cross the threshold."

"There is one at the corner of the road," said Tibbets, rushing away to procure the lemon and immediate necessaries for the sick-room.

Brandon was not long in finding the doctor, who approved the measures taken. He assisted in carrying the sufferer to bed and insisted on their sending for a nurse.

"Let me have my way, sir," returned Tibbets. "I'll get a woman I know to do my work, and I'll be nurse. It would just kill my master to see a stranger about him."

"Yes, I am sure it would," urged Claude.

Here the patient muttered, "Brandon, are you there?"

"I am," coming forward and taking the nerveless hand which lay on the coverlet.

"Help me to live a little while longer. I cannot die till it is made safe—till Claude—Claude is——" He could not finish the sentence.

"No, Mr. Tracey, we'll get you all right again, but

you must obey the doctor and see him every day.

"Yes, yes," he breathed rather than said.

Claude's heart swelled with gratified feeling when she heard what seemed to her evidence that she was uppermost in her father's thoughts and heart—that heart which she feared was so callous towards her! It was the first time she had been brought into contact with serious illness. She felt terribly unhinged, almost shamefully helpless; though trembling from head to foot, she strove to keep calm, to obey Tibbets as intelligently as she could, fetching and carrying to her orders. What should they have done without Brandon, she thought, he was so prompt and active and considerate?

"You are wearing yourself out," he said to Claude, meeting her at the foot of the stairs. "You are looking quite exhausted"—touching her hand— "you are trembling from head to foot. Where shall I find wine? You must take some."

"I do not feel tired. Tell me, do tell me what the doctor says, what you think he thinks."

"He thinks your father has had a great shock, and will need much care in the future, but he is in no immediate danger. This is his real opinion. Come and sit down for a few minutes."

Somewhat relieved, Claude followed him into the dining-room, where Brandon found the cellaret unlocked, and insisted on administering a glass of sherry to his unnerved companion.

"If you wish I will remain here to-night. I may be of use."

"I think it is unnecessary," she returned. "You have done us great service already! The person who

comes to assist Tibbets occasionally is here. We have all we want for the night."

"You ought to have some one with you besides Tibbets, and ought to let some of your friends know."

"I have no friend but Aunt Selby in London—and—my father does not like her, unfortunately."

"Yes, I know," returned Brandon with a slight smile. "He need not see her, and it would be a comfort to you!"

"Ah! what a comfort!" cried Claude, clasping her hands, while tears would roll over and course slowly down her pale cheeks.

"Then I will write to her, and post the letter as I go home. There are pens and paper in the study. Tell me her address."

"Thank you, oh, thank you so much. I am afraid I have no stamp; I never have."

"I daresay I may find one in my pocket." Brandon smiled. "My dear Miss Tracey, we must alter this state of things; your father's small eccentricities are rather trying."

"He will be quite different when he recovers; you see"—the colour came back with shy pleasure as she spoke—"how much I am in his heart and thoughts!"

Brandon looked at her, surprised for a moment at the interpretation she put on her father's unfinished sentence. A moment's thought, however, showed him her conclusion was natural and fortunate. It would help her over many rough places.

"Then as soon as the doctor has seen your father

at 10.30 I shall leave you, as you think I can be of no further use."

* * * * * * *

A long period of careful attendance and constant watching was thus inaugurated. In spite of her absorbing occupations, Mrs. Selby contrived to pay frequent visits to her niece. Later in the progress of Mr. Tracey's recovery she even managed to get her out for a walk now and then, and once even as far as Whiteley's for a delightful hour spent in choosing curtains for the dining-room. The drawing-room was reserved for the exercise of Kate's fancy, as she occupied the position of dictator in these matters.

Mr. Tracey rose from his bed a weaker, but neither a wiser or a better man; yet weakness improved him. He was less bitter in his miserliness, an intense desire to live until his money and his daughter were safe in Brandon's keeping (the daughter being a mere annex to the money) inducing him to permit a little freer expenditure on himself, which created a slight general relaxation. Claude now became very useful to him: he was too weak to write and often to read, so he constantly availed himself of his daughter's eyes and deft right hand. He had, however, an invincible objection to her writing any letters respecting his various investments.

"It won't do, Brandon," he murmured, sinking his voice to a hoarse whisper—"she must not know what I possess. She'll fancy it will be all hers, and think she can do what she likes; but she can't, she can't. You will come now and again and write for me, eh, Brandon?"

"Yes, when I can, Mr. Tracey, but I have a good

deal on my hands. Suppose you have Hobson (the man you think you can do without now your affairs are so nearly wound up); suppose you have him here two or three times a week to write your business letters?"

"Ah! but it will cost a fortune, Brandon—a little fortune."

"My dear Mr. Tracey, your experience ought to teach you that you must risk your sprat to catch your whale; you cannot manage your large fortune without help, beyond your daughter's and mine."

"I suppose so, Brandon. I wish you were my son-in-law; I want you to be my heir. I shouldn't like to leave my money away from Claude. She is a quiet, useful creature; I don't find her any trouble; she lives, therefore she costs, but I don't object to her at all. You have known her now over two months; ask her to marry you and get it over; then I will feel comfortable—yes, quite comfortable!"

"Impossible, Mr. Tracey! To ask a young lady who has not the faintest idea that marriage is thought of between us, and who scarcely knows me—to ask her to give herself to me for life would be an insult. It would insure rejection."

"Nonsense! Mere superstition! I daresay she has married you a dozen times in her own mind already; and as to rejecting you, she daren't. If she does, why, I have done my duty by her; I am exonerated from all responsibility—she shall have her mother's fortune and not a penny more!"

"And in my turn I say nonsense, Mr. Tracey. You could never do anything so unjust. I hope Miss Tracey will accept me, but I will not offend her by precipitancy; you must let me manage a rather deli-

cate matter my own way," said Brandon, while he thought: "It will be an act of humanity to rescue this poor child from the hands of this unfeeling curmudgeon, and for me a chance of fortune such as I never dreamt of. I can hesitate no longer."

"Fool! fools!" ejaculated Tracey, sinking back in his chair. "You always contradict me, Brandon, yet I believe in you, and trust you as I do no one else."

"Believe me you have not misplaced your trust, and I shall carry out your views if you allow me to do it in my own way. I do not want to go against you, in fact."

"Well, do as you will! Only carry out our plan. I cannot argue any more. But I want my plans carried out before I die."

During these weeks Brandon was a constant visitor; Mr. Tracey always looked for him with impatience and was soothed by his visits. Claude grew accustomed to his presence. There was a cold yet kind superiority about him which forbade anything like free intercourse; nevertheless Claude had unbounded reliance on him, though he puzzled her somewhat. Neither was aware that it was his curious unsettled condition of mind as respected her which influenced them both. In truth he liked her too well, he compassionated her too sincerely, not to be more than half ashamed of his own design to make her his wife before she had an opportunity of seeing something of society and knowing her own mind, before taking the most important step of her life; this embarrassed him and refrigerated both manner and feeling.

There are high lights, however, to every picture, and at last a glance of pleasure pierced the gloom of poor

Claude's surroundings! At last Aunt Selby's house was sufficiently furnished to be fit for human habitation; at last Kate and Janet arrived from Dresden, and all united in a prayer that Claude might be permitted to spend Christmas Day with them.

How she longed to go! Yet she rebuked herself for the wish. To leave her father on that festival! It was hard to renounce it: she would consult Brandon. He was frequently at Lichfield Terrace now; there were plenty of opportunities. She often played and sang to him, and even Mr. Tracey sat in the gaunt, bare drawing-room sometimes. The doctor thought the confined space of the study not so good for him; still there were many quarters of an hour when she was alone with Brandon.

"Why should you not dine with your aunt on Christmas Day?" was Brandon's answer to her query. "Mr. Tracey sees no difference between one day and another. He goes to bed so early too that you can quite well get away. I do not dine till eight, so I can pay him a prolonged visit. Leave it to me!"

"I leave a great deal to you, Mr. Brandon," said Claude with a smile. "The result of leaning on you will make me helpless, cowardly. I ought to be able to speak to my father myself."

"Leave him alone," returned Brandon, "your father is rather a difficult subject, especially as regards yourself; he does not know how to deal with such 'kittle cattle' as young ladies."

"Kittle cattle," said Claude—"does that mean that girls are troublesome? I never heard the phrase before."

"I fear it sounds uncivil! It really means—I can-

not exactly define it—something subtle and delicate."

"I hope so," said Claude, laughing—"at all events I think my father and I understand each other better than we did at first. Feeling sure that I am his first consideration gives me courage, and without courage one cannot succeed!"

"Are you very eager for success?" asked Brandon, watching the expression of her eyes, which grew thoughtful and dreamy.

"Eager? No! I don't think I am eager about anything, but I am anxious to win my father's liking and confidence; without them I have no home."

"And is this the only success you care for?"

"Yes, at present, indeed, I do not see what success I need; one does not want much to make life very pleasant."

"That is a new doctrine," said Brandon; "you are fortunate to have such security against future need."

"Not yet! Although I want but little that little may be difficult to get."

"What do you consider most essential?" asked Brandon with some earnestness.

"Oh, my ideas would seem foolishness to you."

"I do not think so; I should like to win your confidence, Miss Tracey, then I should feel as if I were a member of the family!"

"We give you as much trouble as if you were," said Claude, looking up to him with a smile which he could not help seeing was arch and sweet. "For my part, confidence or no confidence, I accept you heartily," and she held out her hand to him half shyly, half frankly, as she spoke.

Brandon, a good deal struck, took and held it for a

moment. Now was his chance he told himself. He might have pressed it tenderly, he might have looked in her eyes caressingly, he might have told her, in tones which said far more than words, that his most ardent wish was to be of use and comfort to her. None could have done all this better than Brandon. Yet after an instant's friendly grasp he let it go with a word of quiet thanks, and so lost a fine opportunity of kindling the first spark of that glow which he ought to arouse in her heart, if his own and her father's plan was to succeed. There was something in her truthful simplicity that compelled him to be sincere.

"Then you think I may venture to ask to spend next Thursday with my aunt?"

"Certainly, undoubtedly!'"

CHAPTER V.

"CHRISTMAS DAY."

CHRISTMAS DAY was the reverse of the received idea of that festival. There was no snow nor sparkling frost, neither were rosy skaters seen about, with skates dangling over their arms. It was the reverse of the shield—an oppressive, dull, drizzling day; still Claude's heart rejoiced as she closed the paternal door behind her. She was going from darkness to light, from caution, suppression, the constant fear of doing wrong, to the liberty, the security of a real home, the only home she had ever known. Gainsborough Gardens was, for a quick walker, about twenty minutes from Lichfield Terrace. Claude's feet seemed winged as she lightly picked her away along the muddy streets, which wore the deserted, depressing aspect peculiar to London on high festivals. Not a creature was to be seen but occasional maid-servants, in their best attire and painfully new boots, hurrying along to make the best of a brief holiday to catch the omnibus or train. She too had waited to do her service before she started on her outing, and it was almost tea-time before she reached her aunt's abode.

She found a merry party and a hearty welcome waiting her. As yet she had only had glimpses of her cousins; to-day it was like old times to take off her hat and cloak and sit down with them.

Kate Selby was a tall brunette, who was generally

described as a "fine girl," with nut-brown hair and large hazel eyes, a laughing mouth, and rich colour. Her fine physique seemed to have influenced her nature. She was frank, fearless, kindly and quite confident in her own taste, her own luck, her own judgment. The youngest girl was a quiet little damsel of fifteen, very studious and rather silent. She had been a delicate child and was a great pet with her mother; at present she was rather plain but certainly interesting.

The festive occasion was enhanced by the presence of Tom, the only son, who resembled his mother. He was scarcely over middle height, slight and dark, with sharp black eyes, but by no means resembling Lady Elmslie's idea of a boy in an office. He had fairly good manners, and, though suffering from shyness, looked like a gentleman.

They were all gathered together in the almost empty drawing-room, which could only boast curtains, a couple of Oriental rugs, a piano, a collection of chairs from all the other rooms, and a grand fire.

On a table from the kitchen, covered with a smart cloth, tea was set forth and presided over by Kate, while Mrs. Selby, a small woman, well and becomingly dressed in black silk, with a pretty cap of fine lace and red velvet ribbon, sat by the fire in a basket chair, with her tea-cup in her hand. She was a brunette too, with regular features, iron-grey hair, and an extremely firm mouth.

"Why, Claude dear, how late you are!" cried Kate, starting up to embrace her. "No end of a happy Christmas to you! We thought you would have come to luncheon."

"Welcome, my love! I am glad to see you look so well," from her aunt.

"Oh, Claude dear! it is so nice to have you! I wish you could stay all night," said Janet.

"Well, Claude, have you forgotten me?" asked Cousin Tom.

"Hardly!" said Claude, smiling, "though you have nearly grown out of my memory."

"Yes, I really believe he will be tall yet," said Kate, who was busy pouring out tea for her cousin, while Janet lifted up the muffins from the fender.

"Where is my uncle?"

"He went out to see an old brother officer of his, who is laid up with gout at Kensington; he will be back soon."

Then Claude's hat and jacket were taken off and her muddy boots removed, and they sat down for a delightful talk round the fire, with newspapers for screens, in the delightful glow which induces confidence.

"It was miserable at Dresden after you all went," said Kate. "That month (or was it not five weeks?) while Mummy was looking for a house was the longest time I ever knew, though we had some skating the last week."

"But it was not good," put in Janet.

"And whom do you think I skated with the last day?" resumed Kate.

"I cannot guess."

"Lieut. Von Riesenberg. He was asking so much about you, Claude, and was quite sentimental (though he is a good deal taken up with Therese Müller, you remember her—a pretty little girl, the

daughter of Oberst Müller, that man who lived in the Bürger Wiese)."

"I am glad to hear it," said Claude, laughing, "he is such a nice boy!"

"He is quite three years older than you are," said Janet.

"I feel three years older than he is!"

"That's just like a girl," remarked Tom, who had attained the mature age of nineteen. "They are so desperately conceited."

"Pooh! they are just nothing compared to boys—I mean as to conceit," said Kate.

"I was quite sorry to leave Dresden at the last," said Janet.

"Ah! so was I awfully sorry, and have been sorry ever since. I shall never forget coming back to London," and Claude shivered.

"Poor child!" ejaculated Aunt Selby. "But you are getting on better with your father now?"

"Oh, yes, much better; I did not understand him at first; now I know how much he thinks of me and cares for me!"

"Thinks and cares for you!" exclaimed Tom indignantly. "Why doesn't he keep a carriage for you then, instead of letting a delicate little thing like you tramp through the mud?"

"Tom, you must not speak like that; my father is not, cannot be well off. He has been saving for me, he says, and has got into the habit of self-denial and——"

"Nonsense, Claude! I know he is considered a very rich man in the city. He has made a pile on the Stock Exchange, and lends money on a large scale;

he began drawing out of business near three years ago, when he had a sharp attack of illness, and he is nearly clear of it now. I know what I am talking about, I can tell you."

"Well, do not talk to me about it, Tom; I want to be at peace with my father and make him like me."

"And you are quite right, Claude," said Mrs. Selby. "All you have to do is to keep to what you think is the right thing, and come what may you will be safe."

"But suppose Mr. Tracey could be coaxed into giving Claude a horse?—two horses?—then I might ride one of them," cried Kate with a joyous laugh. "How delightful it would be! I have always longed to ride. I did enjoy going out with my father the few times Mummy could let us go. Do you remember when we went with the Baron Holderberg to Wesenstein? That was a heavenly day!" and they talked for some time of their Dresden adventures and reminiscences. This was interrupted by the entrance of Major Selby, looking bright and big.

"Well, my little girl, how goes it? No end of happy Christmases to you!" he cried, embracing her heartily, then holding her from him. "Why, you are looking pounds better than when I saw you last. Nursing seems to agree with you. How is papa?" (The Major was a little old-fashioned in his habits of speech.) "Coming round, eh? and thankful to have a sweet little daughter to nurse him? Gad! it is good for sore eyes to see you all together again. Kate's blooming, eh? and this fellow has taken a start," slapping his son's shoulder; "thought he was

going to be Tom Thumb, now he'll do though he is no giant."

"He is almost too tall to dance with me," said Claude, smiling at her cousin, who blushed and looked uncomfortable.

"Dance! By Jove! we'll kick away the rugs and have a waltz after dinner."

"That will be great fun!" said Kate. "Tom has asked two chums of his to dinner, who are rather lonely in London (Mummy said he might); and boys like dancing better than music or anything intellectual."

"All right," said Major Selby, who had drawn a solid Windsor chair (also an importation from the kitchen) to the fire. "I asked a poor homeless child too. He'll be here presently. I knew him long ago in Paris; he was learning French there in a family and was bored to death; he is some sort of a relation to old Sowerby. I met him there to-day, didn't know him a bit till he spoke, but Gad! he knew me and was right glad to see me. He's all adrift to-day. Was going to some gay country house and came up to town yesterday *en route* there, when a telegram followed him to say that scarlet fever had broken out and every one was put off. His own house is empty and there is no one in town, so——"

"Who is this newly recovered friend?" asked Mrs. Selby in an unpromising voice.

"Sir Philip Brandon—a very nice, unaffected fellow."

"Well I do not fancy he will thank you for asking him to such a homely family party as ours," said Mrs. Selby calmly. She was too much a gentlewoman

and too long accustomed to the simplicity of continental life to be troubled by the advent of such a fine gentleman as Sir Philip Brandon probably was. There was dinner enough, and good of its kind.

"Sir Philip Brandon," repeated Kate; "I suppose he is an *elegant*, of the first water. I always wanted to meet some English grandees. I suppose this man is a grandee, dad?"

"Nothing very grand, I assure you; a good-humoured fellow and a keen sportsman. I had no idea he was 'any one,' when I met him. It was while we were living at Avranches," (to his wife), "you had gone over to put Tom to school, and I was staying with my sister in Paris. He has come into a fortune, and the lord knows what, since."

"Well, never mind, he is welcome. I daresay we shall never see him again."

Then Uncle Selby had much to ask about Mr. Tracey, his health, his temper, his bearing towards his daughter. When Claude had satisfied him on these and other subjects, it was time to prepare for dinner, and Tom's two friends arrived—one a boy of eighteen, the other a mild, melancholy youth of three or four and twenty with a strong Scotch accent. They were cordially received by the genial Major. Then Claude was conducted by her cousins to their apartment, the arrangement and decoration of which were duly admired. This occupied some time, so that they had scarcely made some slight alteration of dress, when the dinner-bell rang and they hastened downstairs.

By the fire, talking to Mrs. Selby, stood a gentleman in evening dress on whose showy shirt front a

single diamond glittered, a broadly-built man of middle height, reddish brown complexion, hair and moustaches. His eyes were light and keen, somewhat angry-looking when he did not smile; when he did, which was frequently, he looked jovial and joyous, showing a fine row of white teeth.

"My daughter, Sir Philip," said Major Selby, with a wave of the hand—"My niece, Miss Tracey."

To her aunt's surprise, a look of recognition, a slight smile came to Claude's eyes and face. Sir Philip bowed, then made a step towards her and said, "I did not anticipate the pleasure of meeting Miss Tracey. Shall we see Ralph this evening?" watching her as he spoke.

"Mr. Brandon? No. He will be with my father now, I imagine, and dines somewhere in South Kensington."

"A member of the family already," thought Sir Philip; but he only said, "Indeed."

Dinner being announced prevented further speech, and Sir Philip offered his arm to his hostess.

The dining-room was Mrs. Selby's domain, and its furnishing was complete. It was a comfortable, cheerful room, the table tastefully decorated with foliage and ferns, two neat servants with snowy caps and aprons waited, a blazing fire and bright lamps, all in delightful contrast to the chill, damp dreariness outside.

"This is the first comfortable moment I have had to-day!" said Sir Philip, unfolding his napkin and looking boldly across at Kate, who was opposite. "The sort of glow, moral and physical, you have contrived to get up, Mrs. Selby, is charming."

"You are very good to say so; this is the first Christ-

mas we have spent in England for five years, and we are all in high glee at finding ourselves once more settled, or nearly settled, in London, so I suppose the inward condition of the spirit communicates itself to the outward atmosphere. Then, Christmas is the brightest time of the year in Germany, so we have brought back the impression with us."

"It is a deuced disagreeable time in England, I can tell you; every bore that has the smallest claim of relationship has to be asked to dinner; and every soul that ever held your horse, or swept a crossing within a mile from one's house, wants to be tipped."

"All that is expected in Germany," said Kate, "besides working one's fingers off for one's special friends. I was always penniless for three months after Christmas."

"Was this part of the festivity?" asked Sir Philip, elevating his eyebrows.

"Oh, yes. It was all most exciting; and last year we went to the 'Kunstler's Bal,' which was perfectly delightful. There are always dances and parties at Christmas."

"I fear you will not find the London balls so charming."

"I am dying to go to one, nevertheless," cried Kate.

"I think they are ghastly things here," said Sir Philip. "Dancing in a mob is like a free fight, if you intend to keep your partner's clothes from being torn off her back. I have not gone to one for a couple of seasons.

"Why, you will forget how to dance," said Kate, dismayed. "We must give you a lesson this even-

ing; the carpet is not yet down in the drawing-room, and Claude, Miss Tracey, plays dance music admirably."

"Thank you," he returned, laughing, "if such exertion is possible after that gorgeous turkey," as the servant placed it before her master. "I see you have the orthodox Christmas fare."

Dinner progressed gaily. Sir Philip was no fastidious man of fashion; he enjoyed a good plain dinner, and sound, unpretending sherry, with a pretty face opposite him and natural hearty gaiety; indeed the whole thing was more lively than the fine party he had been engaged to probably would have been.

All this time he hardly heard Claude's voice, though she talked a good deal, in a quiet way, to her uncle, next to whom she sat, and even to her cousin Tom across the table, but he determined to cultivate her after dinner. He would find out what the attraction was to Ralph Brandon, that solemn, sensible buffer, who might be fifty from his gravity and taste for hard work.

When the gentlemen left the table, they found the drawing-room already denuded of its rugs, and Kate playing an inspiriting Viennese waltz. Before Sir Philip could feel in his pocket for his gloves, Janet was whisking round her brother's melancholy friend, while Claude seized upon her uncle, who was still a fairly good cavalier. Tom's companion office boy being taken in hand, and obliged to make conversation by his hostess, Sir Philip found his opportunity to extract some useful information from the guileless son of the house. Tom was quite ready to tell all he knew. "Yes, Miss Tracey was his first cousin, his

mother's niece; she used always to spend her holidays with them when she was a little thing, because her mother was dead. Then, after, she came to live with his family when they had been a while in Germany. He had never met Mr. Brandon, but he had heard his cousin Claude mention him; believed he nearly lived at old Tracey's; wasn't sure what connection there was between them, but there was some. Tracey was an awful screw, but was rolling in money. Would you believe it, he hardly gives the poor girl clothes to wear! lets her tramp through the muddy streets rather than send her in a cab," concluded Tom indignantly, "and she's not strong. He does not care a rap about her and she has been nursing him like a brick. It's an awful shame."

"Scandalous, by Jove!" said Sir Philip. "I shall be delighted to take her home to-night. I told them to send the brougham at eleven."

"Oh, you needn't trouble," returned Tom quickly. "Mother says I am to take her back in a cab."

"I dare say she does," thought Sir Philip. "And so this old miser has been ill, has he? I suppose your charming cousin will reap the benefit of his screwiness?"

"What use will that be when she is old? and men like Tracey live for ever."

"Yes, that is true," returned Sir Philip absently, while he thought: "Master Ralph knows what he is about: I must find out more about this. She is a neat little thing, but that tall cousin of hers is a stunner! Curious chance that has thrown me across her! Jolly people! Can't forgot how old Selby stood by me when I was so near getting into an awful scrape that time

in Paris. I suppose they haven't much money, but they seem to have all the necessaries of life. Fancy dancing here on Christmas Day in regular bourgeois style!" By this time he had got out his gloves, and Major Selby confessing himself beaten, set his niece free, and Sir Philip immediately claimed her. It was a long time since he had attempted a waltz, but given room and a taking partner, he rather liked the exercise. Indeed he was a man to whom all exercise was acceptable, and in Irish parlance he handled his feet well.

He found to his surprise that Claude was a light, steady, indefatigable partner, more enduring than himself. When they paused at length, Sir Philip wiped his brow and found breath enough to say, "So my cousin, Ralph Brandon, is a great chum of yours?"

"A chum of mine!" repeated Claude, opening her large eyes. "He is very kind and useful to me, but he wants a different kind of chum from me," with a strong emphasis on the personal pronoun.

"Why?" asked Sir Philip. "I am sure you would be a charming chum for any man."

"Would he be a charming chum to me?" asked Claude.

"By George! I never thought of that."

"Why?"

Before he could answer she exclaimed, "I must relieve Kate," and slipped away from him like something intangible. Kate rose from the piano, and the next moment a fresh hand was emphasising the time of a dreamy waltz, and Kate stood straight and slim beside her, looking with smiling, inviting eyes towards Sir Philip.

"My partner has deserted me to relieve you, so you are bound to fill her place," and he held out his hand for hers.

"Am I?" she said, laughing. "I must not shirk my responsibilities." She glanced up into his eyes as he put his arm round her as they started. Claude danced well, but Kate was the very spirit of the dance, light, supple, bounding to every phase of the music; she communicated something of her own enjoyment to her partner.

"She is a stunner!" thought Sir Philip, "a sort of girl to lose one's head about. I wish she were old Tracey's heiress, but the general cussedness of things forbids this. I'd like to cut out Ralph, he is so confoundedly sly! I guessed he was up to mischief when I met him in those high latitudes with that shy yet cool little girl. It is a curious turn of fortune's wheel altogether."

The pleasure-loving young baronet had not enjoyed anything half so much for many a day as this impromptu dance in the empty drawing-room of a suburban abode. He had ceased to be a dancing man for some time, though his ear for music disposed him to enjoy it. The difficulties which encompass that exercise in London, however, had disenchanted him.

"It is really a treat to dance with a partner like you," he said, as Kate Selby paused at last, more from consideration for Claude's fingers than any feeling of fatigue.

"You don't do so badly yourself," she returned with frank criticism. "Then of course we had the place to ourselves. I have not had many English partners, but I do not fancy Englishmen can steer like Americans:

it is quite delightful to dance with an American," and Kate sighed.

"What an unpatriotic young lady! I suspect there is some particular Yankee round whom your memory clings?"

"Oh, yes! I have very particularly pleasant memories of two or three, and they skate so well!"

"Don't rouse an undying hatred of our American cousins in my ardent heart! What Briton could stand being cut out by a Yankee?" Kate laughed joyously. Then Mrs. Selby took Claude's place at the piano.

"I must have a turn with Tom's friends," said Kate. "Janet will dance with you. Mummy plays very nicely, considering."

Seeing Claude pairing off with Tom, Sir Philip good-humouredly took out the little schoolgirl, and was sooner tired than before. After a pause and a little talk about the social differences between English and foreign life, Kate and her sister sang a couple of duets, one a Studenten Lied with a rattling chorus in which all the family joined, even the Major throwing in a deep note or two very effectively.

When this was over Claude in a sorrowful tone said she had already stayed too long, and must really go home.

"My trap has not yet come, I'm afraid," said Sir Philip, overhearing this, "or I should beg permission to escort you."

"Thank you. That is her cousin Tom's duty, and pleasure too," said Mrs. Selby, smiling, but with firm politeness. So Claude said good-night, and retired with her aunt to be wrapped up.

"Will you allow Ralph Brandon to take me with

him to call on your father and yourself?" was Sir Philip's parting request.

"Yes, if you wish it," said Claude with an unaffected look of surprise, which made him smile as he thought: "She does not seem to think me a very desirable acquaintance." Then they had more songs. Kate sang a ballad alone in a rich contralto voice, and altogether things were so much to Sir Philip's taste that he was quite sorry to say good-night.

"I must go out of town to-morrow," he said, "but when I return at the end of next month, Mrs. Selby, I hope you will allow me to take you and your daughters to some of the theatres. I must try and cut out the Yankees, eh, Miss Selby?"

"Yes, by all means, if you can!" she returned with a saucy nod.

"Thank you very much," replied her mother more guardedly.

"And I have to thank you for a delightful evening. I hope to see you directly I come back. Good-night, Major Selby."

"Jolly old boy!" was his mental comment as he drove back to his hotel. "Those people seem to enjoy themselves thoroughly and have everything they want, on, I suppose, the tenth of my income, and here am I pretty considerably dipped, trying to extract a little pleasure of the dead and alive materials round me. By Jove! that girl has vitality enough to stir the sap in the stump of a blasted oak! I must not let her stir mine too much. No! an heiress is my game! I wonder what that little Miss Tracey will have; but if Ralph is going in for her, I suppose I must not interfere, though she would come in handy

for me and is come-at-able too, nice quiet little soul! Ralph won't care a rap about her—doubt if I should either. I must find out what Ralph really means. If he chose he might be a dangerous rival, or I am much mistaken!"

CHAPTER VI.

WOMAN DISPOSES.

CHRISTMAS was past, and the holly and ivy decorations of the festive period were somewhat dry and dusty. The Selby family were quite settled, and had gathered some old Indian acquaintances about them, and Mr. Tracey, though needing care, had resumed his old routine.

"You are beating about the bush too long, a great deal too long, I tell you!" he said with a sort of feeble energy. "What do you want? What objection have you to the girl?" He was sitting with Brandon by the attenuated fire in his study waiting for dinner. Claude for a wonder was out. Brandon had not been at Lichfield Terrace for some days, and his absence helped to make Tracey intolerably peevish and impatient.

"Don't speak in that tone of your daughter, Mr. Tracey! I have no objection to her. How could I? I daresay she is a great deal too good for me. I delay only out of regard to a girl's natural feelings. There is a delicate reserve about Miss Tracey I must not offend, as I should, were I to ask her to be my wife before she had become used to me."

"Used to you! Bah! how long have you known each other now? Over three months. If that isn't long enough, why don't you ask for three years' probation?

You have no regard for my comfort or peace of mind! You don't pretend to be in love with each other, hey?"

"Putting that aside," returned Brandon with a curl of the lip, "I am anxious myself the matter should be settled one way or the other."

"One way or the other," almost screamed Mr. Tracey. "There must be no other way! She must and shall marry you! Who else can she marry? Who has she seen? She is a quiet, modest creature enough!"

"She has been living away from you for years. How can you tell whom she may not have met and liked, and if she has formed any attachment, I hope you will not allow yourself to be angry or unreasonable with her."

"If she chooses to marry any one but the man I have chosen for her," said Tracey in a quiet, determined tone, "I shall simply add a small sum to her mother's fortune which is settled upon her, and bequeath my hard-earned money to some one capable of appreciating it."

"That would certainly be unreasonable and unjust," said Brandon; "however, let us hope that things will turn out as we both wish. Say no more on the subject at present, I promise you to delay no longer; within a week from this time you shall know if I am to be your son-in-law or not."

Mr. Tracey made no reply. He sat quite still gazing at the fire. Brandon did not break the silence. He mused rather uncomfortably on the undertaking before him, half in contempt of himself for the promise he had just given, half in wonder at his own reluctance to "pop the question." After all it was a horrid bore to pretend anxiety for the consent of a

girl you did not care a straw about. In fact, if he liked her less in the kindly protecting way he did, it would be easier to make a formal declaration. He hoped she would not be fluttered or upset, or, worst of all, shed tears. Then, good heavens! what a piece of acting he would have to execute! He did not think, however, that Tracey's simple practical daughter would exact much love-making. While he thought, Tibbets came to announce dinner, and with her entered Claude.

Claude looking more animated and with more colour than usual.

"I was so afraid I should be late," she said. "Uncle Selby took us to the National Gallery, and we could hardly get Janet away. They all walked with me to the gate, and I find I am just in time."

"Ay," returned her father, "that brood can never be regular. You must not run the risk of being late again;"—and taking his stick he hobbled off to dinner.

The meal was eaten almost in silence. Claude, who had enjoyed her afternoon and had returned home in good spirits, felt them flag and an indefinable sense of coming ill steal over her heart as the leaden moments dropped slowly one by one. As soon as the dessert was put on she arose and went to the drawing-room, half unconsciously taking refuge from her own thoughts at the piano. But it was not easy to escape them, as her fingers moved mechanically over the familiar notes, while a picture of her cousin's happy home occupied her mind.

Why was her father so repellent? If he continued always cold and immovable the degree of interest she had taken in him, which she took such trouble to

keep alive, would evaporate altogether. Still things had improved since the day of her miserable home-coming. The drawing-room looked less desolate: Tibbets had made up a glorious fire, then there were candles on the piano, and a lamp on the table, near the fireplace, so——

"Your father has gone to his room," said Brandon, who had approached her unheard. "He feels tired and sleepy. I rather think it is an effort to him to read at night."

"It is; he always asks me to read when night comes."

"Pray do not leave the piano: may I stay and listen to your music for awhile?"

"Oh, yes; I think you like German airs?"

"I like anything with a tune in it!"

Claude laughed softly and played on for some little time.

"Will that do?" she asked at length, rising and coming over to where he sat by the fire.

"Thank you, it was very good." He got up and drew an arm-chair forward for her.

How slight and young she looked, as she leant back, her fair hair showing up against the red damask which covered the seat—graceful too, and refined, but what a mere child! and in another hour she would probably be his affianced wife. Poor little soul: well, he would do his best for her, how heartily he wished he could feel a little more like a lover, he would not then find it so hideously difficult to begin.

"It is very nice and homelike to sit here, to listen to your playing or singing, and above all to talk to

you," he said after a silence of some moments' duration, drawing a chair near her.

"It is not very homelike when you are not here," said Claude, thoughtfully and composedly. "I like to be alone sometimes, but every-day loneliness is rather too much."

"It must be for a young creature like you."

Claude, who had taken her knitting, looked up, struck by something unusual in his voice.

"You speak as if you were my grandfather, Mr. Brandon. To me you seem younger than when I first saw you."

"And to me you seem older; so I suppose we have met each other half way."

Claude smiled and knitted on.

"Claude," began Brandon again, "does it ever strike you that being such good friends, suiting each other so well, we might make a very pleasant home together?" How absurdly uneasy he felt before this simple girl who was barely out of the school-room.

"I am sure I wish you could live here," said Claude, continuing to knit. "It would be very nice for me, but I am sure you would not like it at all. There is no warmth, no liberty."

"Claude, you do not understand me!" cried Brandon, rising and standing before her, almost fearful of the effect his impending avowal would create. "I mean, could I not make you happy in my home as my wife?"

"As your wife!" repeated Claude, in boundless astonishment, but not in the least embarrassed. "How did you ever come to think of such a thing?" and she dropped her knitting in her lap.

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Brandon was mute, he never anticipated such a mode of receiving his proposal. What could he say? He could not vow that love for her overpowered all other considerations, nor protest that from the hour he first saw her she was the one woman in the world for him. He rallied quickly, however.

"Because you would be a charming companion to any man, because I have always felt for you in this cruelly dismal house. Don't you think you would be happier with me?"

"Somebody might be very happy with you, very happy indeed. You are clever and nice, and I believe good."

"If you are good enough to think this, perhaps you will take a favourable view of my project."

Claude shook her head.

"You must love the girl whom you would make happy; now you do not care one bit for me. That is why I am so amazed by your wishing to marry me. What suggested it?"

"My dear Claude, true and lasting affection is not the fiery effervescence poets call love."

Claude smiled and a far away-look came into her eyes.

"She has some other fellow," thought Brandon as he watched her, "and old Tracey's scheme is doomed."

"How do you know that I do not love you? You cannot have much experience in such a matter?" He was getting quite interested in this curious discussion.

"Perhaps instinct may be as good as experience; besides, there was a young German, a Schutzen

officer, who was quite fond of me at Dresden. I was very much surprised and a little sorry, but I could not help seeing and feeling that he loved me, his eyes, his voice, the touch of his hand told me."

"And perhaps won a return?" put in Brandon.

"Oh, no,"—shaking her head gently. "He was too young, a mere boy of twenty-three and rather silly. He has no doubt found somebody else to fall in love with by this time; at all events I know quite well you are not in love, though,"—looking thoughtfully at him,—"I suppose you could love, and therefore I do like you very much, and feel I could trust you. I would not marry you for the world; it would not be a marriage at all."

Brandon bowed his head in silence; Claude resting an elbow on the arm of his chair covered her eyes with her hand, and resumed with a touch of pathos in her voice.

"I have had enough of one home without love; I will not set up another without true love. Very likely no one will ever care as much for me as that poor boy in Germany did. If I do not marry it will not greatly matter; but to be tied for life to a man who only likes you in a friendly way would be too dreadful. I could not endure it. You know you do not love me."

Brandon was greatly touched, he was fairly driven into complete frankness.

"Not as you desire, not as you deserve to be loved," he said. "Perhaps I have not the best kind of love to bestow, but I hope and believe you will yet have the warm, full affection of some fellow infinitely more worthy of you than I am! Forget that I ever

aspired selfishly to appropriate a heart so fresh and true as yours, when I had no equivalent to offer in exchange. Let me be your friend still. I will be most loyally!"

"Yes, gladly!" said Claude, holding out her hand to him with a sweet smile and moist eyes; "and we will never talk nonsense about being married again."

"Never," echoed Brandon, pressing her hand, "if such is your wish! I did not know all that lay hidden under your quiet girlish exterior. The man who wins your heart is much to be envied. "Now Claude,—if I may be so familiar——"

"Yes, we quite understand each other."

"I must warn you," resumed Brandon, "that Mr. Tracey has set his heart on this marriage; he will be greatly irritated by your opposition; we must prepare him for it."

"Oh!" said Claude. Then she stopped and seemed to think. "You spoke to my father, then, first?"

"Yes, of course."

"Ah!" said Claude softly again, "tell me, did my father ask you to marry me?"

"Why should you suppose anything so unlikely?"

"I'm sure he did! My poor father! He does really care for my future, if not for myself! Really, Mr. Brandon, you are too kind and obliging." There was a very perceptible tinge of sarcasm in her voice.

"Pray do not weaken the profound impression you have made by deigning to taunt me, Claude; we agreed to forget the mistake I made. Now I want to discuss with you the best way to avert your father's anger, for he will be furious with you, and

probably with me. I think I shall ask a little more time for reflection, and then I can decline the honour of your hand!"

"That would not be honest," she returned gravely. "No, no, I will tell him. I am not afraid of him. I will tell him the truth and bear the consequences; even a father has no right to dispose of a daughter as he chooses in marriage."

"You are very independent, but I assure you that the consequences may be serious. I must lay the probabilities before you. Mr. Tracey is very wealthy —wealthier than you suppose. His sense of justice is not peculiarly sensitive, and if you disoblige him, he is quite capable of leaving all his fortune away from you!"

Claude's eyes deepened with a look of anger; then she repeated as if to herself—"My father is very wealthy! You knew that?" looking very straight as she spoke into his eyes.

"I understand you," said Brandon, his dark cheek flushing, "and I do not deny that your father's wealth had its attractions. I am a poor man, Miss Tracey, and an ambitious one, but on my word of honour, had I not believed I could make you happy, had I not seen you were a woman I should be pleased to present to the world as my wife, no amount of wealth would have tempted me to make you an offer which roused your wrath."

"I fear I was too hasty—not in my words, for I said nothing offensive—but you perceived what passed through my mind. I am not sure I ought to feel so vexed with you. A marriage is more a matter of business with men than with women. I suppose

at least you have spoken the truth to me now, and I am to believe in you, especially as it is impossible any question of marriage can arise between us again, So let us be friends if you will. Your friendship is of value to me ; I shall be grateful for it."

"And I am grateful to you for accepting it," returned Brandon in a low tone. He felt strangely defeated and put in his place. How completely he had reckoned without his host; how utterly had this girl, on whose timid simplicity he had counted so securely, whose shy pleasure at being asked to become his wife he had almost dreaded, routed him, and her cold father. She had a backbone of no common rigidity under her seeming of soft pliancy. How heartily he wished that obstinate old miser had never drawn him into his scheme for committing both his daughter and his ducats to his guardianship ! He would wash his hands of the whole concern ; yet no, he must not desert Claude ; and she would want his protection through the coming conflict with her father. He must redeem himself in her eyes by disinterested loyalty. "I must put myself right, even if I lose all chance of old Tracey's money, and remain a poor man to the end of my days."

Claude too had thought her thoughts during this long pause, and now broke silence abruptly by uttering them.

"I am so anxious my father should not be deceived. He has no right to quarrel with me for maintaining my rights to dispose of myself, but he has a right to be angry if I deceive him."

"He will think very little of your rights or his

own ; he will be furious, and your whole future may be affected. He can leave you a pauper !"

"That is impossible," firmly. "I carry the means of existence—humble existence—in my head and at the ends of my fingers."

"Very likely, and you may have the satisfaction of seeing some one else revelling in your father's wealth ! No, no, Claude that will never do ; be guided by me."

"Then," continued Claude, "if I do not tell him the truth he will be angry with you, and not give you or leave you any of his money ! I don't wish that. I do not want much myself. It, some of it, might do you a great deal of good. A man ought to be ambitious ; he is not worth much if he has no ambition ; but I have none myself, not an atom ; though I should like to be interested in some clever man's career. I only want home and love and peace for myself. I am quite miserable here. I could endure it if I thought my father cared about me, if I thought I were a little bit of use to him, but I am not, so you see it is impossible I can love him."

"I should think so," said Brandon with the profoundest conviction. "However, as you are good enough to let me call myself your friend, it is my duty to take care of your interests, and I'll do it in spite of you ! You must give me three clear days before you make any move, and I shall see what I can do to make the rough places smooth."

"That you will never do," she returned thoughtfully. "However, I will not oppose you in this, you understand so many things better than I do."

"You certainly understand what you want yourself, and that is more than most people can. Now I must leave you. Believe me, though you have refused me in the most mortifying manner, though you have unmasked my interested selfishness, I have the sincerest esteem and regard for you!"

"I like you too," said Claude, in her quiet, reflective way, "though I was a little vexed with you! You are quite straight and true. Good-night; come soon again! We can meet in perfect comfort, and manage my father so as to spare him as much as possible."

With a curious mixture of sadness and soreness Claude sat down to reflect on this strange conversation.

She had liked Brandon so much. She had trusted him so completely, it grieved her to find that for the sake of her father's money he should offer to share his life with her, "or rather to take mine," she thought, "for I don't suppose any man ever really shared his life with a woman he did not heartily love. I suppose money is a great temptation to a man, men want so much more than women. He is very welcome to my father's money (not all of it), but not to me, unless he was really and truly fond of me. That would alter matters. I am such a quiet plain little thing, probably no man will ever fall in love with me; but then of course I shall not be tempted to fall in love either, so I need not be uncomfortable. Poor Max von Heldreich would have taken a fancy to any one or anything new: he does not count; still, Mr. Brandon was honest and truthful! He will be a kind friend. I wish, oh! so much, that he had never asked me to marry him. I must forget it. Why am

I such a coward? I dread the explanation with my father. It is shameful to be a coward! He ought not to be kept in the dark. Suppose he is furious and turns me out of doors? Could I maintain myself? I think I might. Yet he must care for me, or he would not be at the trouble of asking Mr. Brandon to marry me. I wonder how much my father promised to give him, for taking me off his hands?"

At this point of her meditations they were interrupted by Tibbets. "Aren't you coming to bed, Miss Claude? It's all hours, and your fire nearly burnt out. The master rang half an hour ago for some barley water, and asked if Mr. Brandon had gone. I told him he had just gone, and he says, 'It's rather late for him,' says he; 'mind you put out the candles when you go down,' so may be you had better get to bed, my lamb."

"Yes, Tibbets, I will go. Good-night. Thank you for reminding me. I was nearly dreaming with my eyes open."

"Dreaming, were you?" muttered Tibbets to herself, as she drew a fire-guard from the corner where it was concealed and hung it over the bars, and then proceeded to blow out the lights. "I'd like to know what you were dreaming about, my pretty! —that nice elegant gentleman, I'll be bound. I wish you were just married to him safe and sure, out of this cavern of a house. He'd take good care of you! May be it's all right!"

* * * * *

The next day at midday Mr. Tracey was exceedingly restless. He asked Claude to read the same

financial paragraphs over and over again. He complained of his chair, of his arrowroot, and refused his glass of wine. They were drifting into boundless extravagance, he said, and he at least would not countenance it. Better die and leave his responsibilities behind him, than live to witness the melting away of his few hard-earned hundreds. He could not imagine what kept Brandon; he had fully expected Brandon.

"But Mr. Brandon seldom comes in the morning," said Claude.

"I thought he might come to-day," returned Tracey, darting a curious angry, inquisitive look at her.

It was partly a relief, partly a shock, to hear at this juncture from the lips of Tibbets the announcement that "Mrs. Selby is in the drawing-room, miss, and would like to see the master if he is well enough."

"No, I am not!" said Tracey in a sharp tone.

"I wish you would see her for my sake!" cried Claude entreatingly. "There is no fire in the drawing-room, and she will not stay long."

"Well, let her come in."

The next minute Mrs. Selby appeared, well and comfortably dressed, her cloak trimmed with handsome dark fur, and her bonnet tasteful and becoming, her *tout-ensemble* suitable and ladylike. Having kissed her niece, she took the straight stiff hand submitted to her.

"I hope you are feeling a little stronger, Mr. Tracey?" she asked cheerfully. "I hear of you from Claude, but neither Major Selby nor I have called lately, for we know you do not like to be troubled with visits."

"No, I do not," returned Tracey, with decision. Mrs. Selby smiled and put her muff on the table with the air of being determined to have her say out.

"I have ventured to beard the lion in his den to-day," she resumed "in order to ask a favour, which I hope you will grant."

"That depends on what it is. If it is money I have none at the beginning of the year."

"No, indeed it is not! I want you to let Claude come to us to-day, and remain till the day after to-morrow. We are going to see the pantomime, and should be so pleased to have her with us."

"Then it is virtually asking for money."

"Oh, no, I should not be so insane as to expect you to pay for her," returned Mrs. Selby, laughing good-humouredly. "Sir Philip has very kindly sent us a box at Drury Lane, so we can all enjoy the spectacle gratis. It is a large box, I believe."

"Sir Philip Brandon!" said Mr. Tracey in tones significant of decided aversion. "I know him. I fancy he gets or gives on an extravagant scale. Is Brandon—Ralph Brandon—to be of the party?"

"No, I never thought of him. I fancy the pantomime is rather too childish for so grave and reverend a signor as he is."

"Ay! Ralph Brandon is no fool," grimly.

"Then you will give Claude leave of absence for a couple of nights?" insinuatingly. "You would like to come, dear, would you not?"

"Yes, if my father can spare me, but——"

"What I want you for is to read. Tibbets can do everything else for me, so you may go to-morrow and come back the next day," said Tracey with

brutal candor. "And do not come back too late. I can read by daylight, but I want you after dark."

"Thank you," returned Claude quietly. "Then, aunt, I will come to you to lunch to-morrow; it will be delightful to go to the theatre once more." Mr. Tracey growled out something inarticulate but disapproving.

"Claude is not looking particularly well, Mr. Tracey," said Mrs. Selby. "Heavy-eyed and pale, as if she had not slept."

Mr. Tracey looked sharply at his daughter. "What should ail her? She has everything she wants, she lives on the fat of the land, she has nothing to do, and a luxurious home, fires right and left, piano to play on, everything she asks for."

"Oh! I daresay she is greatly pampered," rejoined Mrs. Selby with a pleasant laugh; "but you see young people get tired of monotony, no matter how luxurious."

"Monotony! I don't know what you mean! If she wants to give balls and parties and turn my house out of the windows, why, she sha'n't, that's all."

Claude laughed a sweet, frank laugh. "Indeed, I do not, my dear father. I should not dream of such things."

"So much the better; you have a little sense, though you are but a girl."

"I am very glad you have impressed your father so favourably, Claude," said Mrs. Selby with great gravity. "I trust, my dear sir, you give my training credit for some of the sense."

"There is not enough to divide," said Mr. Tracey

grimly. "Neither girls nor women have much to spare."

"After such a cruel speech I must go!" said Mrs. Selby, smiling and taking up her muff. "I have always regretted, dear Mr. Tracey, that you never appreciated me as you ought." Mr. Tracey looked at her with angry eyes, but refrained even from good words, if he thought them.

Here Tibbets brought in a letter, at which Mr. Tracey glanced with evident interest, but laid upon his table without opening.

"Good-bye, dear Claude. To-morrow then, at one, we shall look for you. The girls will be so pleased. Good-bye, Mr. Tracey; Major Selby desired his best compliments to you. Thank you so much for allowing Claude to come to us. Try and make up your mind to let her stay till Friday, we'll take such care of her."

"Good-morning," returned Mr. Tracey briefly.

Claude accompanied her aunt to the door.

"Good-bye, dear," said that lady; "you must keep up your reputation for sense with your father; you really seem to be improving your position with him: he is terribly difficult, but I think he is taking to you. Be very patient and persevering, my love. It is your duty, and I am rather distrustful of that Mr. Brandon's influence."

"Are you? Why? He is very good; he is my friend."

"Ah! well, I hope so. Do not be later than one to-morrow; the girls have much to tell you! Janet has been wasting her time writing verses again—very tiresome of her! Good-bye, dear."

When Claude returned to her father he was reading

the letter which had been brought to him. When he had finished, he sat a moment in thought, while Claude opened her work-basket. Without her needle-work, the long weary hours *tête-à-tête* with her father would have been almost intolerable.

"There! read that," said Mr. Tracey at length, holding the letter out to her.

"DEAR MR. TRACEY," it ran, "I am suddenly called out of town, which I particularly regret, as I wanted some private conversation with you this evening. I hope to return to-morrow, and will dine with you (if you will permit) the following day, if nothing prevents my return.

"Yours truly,

"RALPH BRANDON."

"I do hope he will not stay away long," cried Claude, speaking out of her thoughts.

"Ha!" said her father, looking sharply at her, "you miss even so grave a companion."

"Yes, very much," she replied steadily, though her colour deepened, as she remembered her father's projects.

A genial smile curled old Tracey's lips.

"Hum! I suppose this is rather a monotonous place for you. Brandon supplies the absence of balls and junketings, hey?"

"Not altogether. I enjoy being with my cousins and meeting people, but I always like to be of use to you."

"I am sure I am much obliged to you," with an incredulous grin, "especially when you have Brandon to help you."

"With or without him," said Claude calmly.

"Read me the telegrams," resumed Mr. Tracey, after some minutes' silence; "there is some kick-up in one of those wretched little South American Republics. It is sure to affect the money market. Why any one ever buys their stock, at least to keep, I can't understand."

So Claude put down her work and read till luncheon was brought.

CHAPTER VII.

"SENT ADRIFT."

BRANDON returned to his own abode after his explanation with Claude, if not a sadder, a wiser man, inasmuch as he had learned an entirely new lesson on an intricate subject—*i.e.*, a young girl's heart.

He had felt very sure of Claude. She was so undemonstrative, she seemed so completely submissive to her father, so gently favourable to himself, that he had gradually come to believe she would approve of her father's wishes. He did anticipate her being agitated by his proposal, that she would blush, tremble or perhaps shed tears, even if she refused him; and then he would have had to plead, to implore, to put on some semblance of lover-like conduct, which would have been an infinite bore. She had certainly saved him such trouble! Who could have believed that so much decision and purpose lurked under that soft, timid exterior? She had completely taken the wind out of his sails: from henceforth she might be his friend, but on terms of perfect equality. He might advise and suggest, he could never dictate. He smiled as he thought of the curious fate which had converted the two women he had thought of marrying into friends: the last was not so strange a metamorphosis as the first, between them there had never been more than friendliness, but how wildly he had loved Beatrice with the first strong passion of youth, how maddening

was her determination to break with him, so soon as anticipated rank and fortune passed to another! Yet she was awfully cut up at parting with him, and said, he believed with perfect truthfulness, that she would rather die for him then and there in the flush of her youth and beauty than face poverty with him! Luxury, refinement, were the absolute necessities of her existence. Life without them was impossible! He had ceased to resent this long since; indeed, he would not willingly have dragged her into poverty, but he did not like her to have been first in the game of renunciation. How wonderful it was to look back and remember that the touch of her hand used to thrill him through from head to heel, of the stinging anger and disgust with which he heard soon afterwards of her marriage with Lord Elmslie, a recently ennobled, wealthy banker! How revolting it was to think of the bridegroom's bulky figure, short neck, and red face! He was a well-known sportsman and *bon vivant*, so all the old love and admiration burnt itself out, and when they met, after his long absence from London, he did not care enough about her to shun her. She seemed to live on good terms with her rubicund, elderly husband, no breath of scandal had touched her name, and Ralph, calmly contemplating her, thought her handsomer than ever.

His second matrimonial scheme was widely different. No distracting emotions of grief or joy stirred his heart on account of the quiet, sedate little girl proposed to him for a wife. He flattered himself they might have been very comfortable together, had not Claude been so unreasonable as to "ask for more;" still he could not help admiring her resolution and

candour, and wonder at the ripeness of judgment in one so young.

But it was a great disappointment that her father's money should slip from his fingers. However, he must do his best to shield Claude from old Tracey's wrath, and its very probable consequence. "I must not deprive the old man of hope altogether, or he will be quite rabid, yet it will be hard to be prudent and honest both. I hope Claude will not announce her objections to me as a husband, at least till I am beside her to soften matters! I almost wish that old miser had not taken such a fancy to me, though he has done me some good turns, which lost him nothing, certainly." Thus mused Brandon while dressing the morning after his rejection. When he sat down to breakfast he found among others a letter in Lady Elmslie's writing. Opening it, he was surprised to find that Lord Elmslie had had a stroke of paralysis and was speechless. "I am in great distress for many reasons, without any friend on whose disinterested advice I can rely (my brother is, you know, in India). May I presume to ask you for old acquaintance' sake to come here for twenty-four hours? I cannot write all I would say, and I do want your counsel very much. I am quite alone. Mr. Grantley, Lord Elmslie's brother and next heir, is not too friendly with me, and I want you!"

It was awkward, very! Lady Elmslie could not really want him! She had the family solicitor to consult! Had she any unpleasant secret to confide in him (Brandon)? Then he particularly wanted to see Mr. Tracey, next day at furthest; still he could not fail his old friend; he might save her from some mistake,

for he had an idea that her business abilities were not great. She had a fiery temper too. So he despatched a telegram promising to be with her that afternoon. Then he wrote some notes and kept an early appointment, finally catching his train by a fluke.

Allerton, Lord Elmslie's place, was about four hours north from London. Darkness was beginning to gather when Brandon reached the end of his journey, where a carriage awaited him. The three miles between the railway station and Lord Elmslie's place were traversed rapidly. The lamps were lit when he reached the house. It was a handsome, richly furnished mansion, like dozens of others scattered about this pleasant land, with something of special luxurious gracefulness in its aspect, while a sort of solemn hush pervaded the atmosphere which suggested the presence of tragedy.

A very serious-looking butler conducted Brandon to Lady Elmslie's private sitting-room, where tea was ready beside a glowing fire. There was no one to greet him, and Brandon stood on the hearth thinking of the curious chance which brought him as a guest and adviser to the fascinating Beatrice. In a few minutes the door opened and Lady Elmslie entered. She was dressed in black silk and lace. Her face was pale and her eyes anxious.

"How good of you to come!" were her first words. "It is awful being here alone!"

"Of course I came," returned Brandon cheerfully, "you must not be too much cast down, my dear Lady Elmslie. Your husband may live for a considerable time. Paralysis rarely kills at once."

"Oh! Ralph, if you saw him, you would hardly

wish him to live! He is terribly disfigured, and looks like a dumb animal, poor man!"

"What do the doctors say?"

"Not much: they think he will linger, and probably have other shocks."

"You ought not to be alone; have you not some lady friend or relation who will come and stay with you?" asked Brandon.

"Oh! I have heaps of friends, but few would like to come and stay in this miserable house. Yes, there is a far-away cousin of my own, a widow; I have written for her; she will probably be here to-morrow evening. Come, have some tea, or would you like wine? and——"

"Thank you, tea is most refreshing."

Lady Elmslie seated herself at the table and poured out a cup silently. "We dine at seven," she said. "I thought you would want dinner early after your cold journey."

"Thank you, you are always considerate. When was Lord Elmslie taken ill?"

"On Sunday afternoon. We had rather a large party, but most of the people had gone away, several others were to arrive on Tuesday, when just before dinner, Carberry—Elmslie's man—came to me in a fright, exclaiming that 'my lord was taken with a fit.' We sent for the doctor, who was out. Oh! it seemed an age before he came. The truth is, that Elmslie has been more and more imprudent for the last three or four years. He drank hard, very hard; he did everything he ought not to do. Oh! Ralph, I have had a terrible life! I tried to hide his conduct from the world, and I partly succeeded!"

"I am sure you did; I never heard a whisper of this."

"Have you not? but then you have lived so little among our set of late, you are too busy to hear gossip. Let me give you another cup of tea, then you shall go to your room, for I have to see the doctor again before dinner. In the evening, when we are quite safe and alone, I will explain why I wanted your advice."

* * * * *

It was a wild, windy night, with dashes of rain, which made themselves heard against the windows of Lady Elmslie's morning room, thickly draped as they were with rich curtains, when she drew a low chair by the fire, and Brandon seated himself beside a small table which held a reading-lamp. There was a short silence, then Lady Elmslie, clasping her hands round her knee, said thoughtfully, "You know they never liked me!"

"Who?" said Brandon.

"Elmslie's brother and two sisters. Of course he might have made a much better marriage; he did not settle much upon me, and a great deal of his property is unentailed, so he could do as he liked with it, and I know he has left me a large sum besides my settlement. It was only last year he did this. The executor is an old friend, but the will was not drawn up by the family solicitor: Elmslie did not wish it."

"Why?" asked Brandon, "it was quite right and natural that he should provide handsomely for such a wife as you have been."

"I do not know; every man has some bugbear that he fears to offend. Now I have this will in my keeping, should my husband die, I do not like to be

obliged to give it into George Grantley's hands. I do not like the family solicitors; through all their civility, I feel they look on me as an interloper. Why should I have the same solicitor as Lord Elmslie and his family—should he die I shall have nothing more to do with them. I want you to recommend me a solicitor, some respectable, conscientious man to whom I can confide this will, and will produce it at the right time! It will make me a rich woman, Ralph, and I have earned the bequest." She suddenly covered her face, her bosom heaved. Brandon looked at her with a certain compassion, not untouched with a feeling that she accepted her present position with her eyes open. He, only said, "I fear that wealth and rank cannot entirely exclude black care."

"Black care would be ten times blacker without them," returned Lady Elmslie thoughtfully. "Can you tell whom I ought to employ?" she added earnestly.

"I think I can," replied Brandon. "I know two of high standing; either of them would suit you. I will write down their names and addresses."

"Thanks, many thanks; how shall I write to them?"

"Oh, that is simple enough. Say that Lord Elmslie is dangerously ill, and should the result unfortunately prove fatal, you will require a legal adviser to watch over your interests, and that you wish to entrust your husband's will to their care."

"Would you take it back to town with you, Ralph?" said Lady Elmslie, insinuatingly. "I should feel quite comfortable if you had charge of it."

Brandon did not reply at once. He thought for a

moment, then he said, "A registered parcel is quite as safe, if not safer, than the most special messenger, and it would be better if you were the sole actor in this matter. The less a stranger—and in the eyes of society I am a stranger—meddles in your affairs the better."

Lady Elmslie coloured, and then grew pale. There was something that stung her in his tone, a dryness and coldness instead of the sympathy she sought to evoke.

"You always had a great deal of sentiment, Ralph. I suppose you consider me a wretch for thinking of my own prospects when my husband lies in such a condition. But what harm does it do him, if I try to protect myself? You know I will do my best for him."

"I have no doubt you will," said Brandon politely.

"And you also know well," she added without heeding him, "how unendurable a cramped, poverty-stricken life would be to me. I would rather be cremated on my husband's funeral pyre, Hindoo fashion, than survive him to pinch and screw as an impoverished peeress, that most wretched of paupers. I know George Grantley will be furious when he finds that Lord Elsmlie has bequeathed all his personalty to me; I do not mean to say that Mr. Grantley would do anything dishonest, but if he knew this will existed he would do his very best to induce Elmslie (and he has influence), to revoke it."

"You are quite right to protect yourself, Lady Elmslie."

"I know I am, still I see you think me unfeeling. I am not, Ralph; I feel a very great deal too much

for my own happiness. Every one wants to be rich; even you, with all your high-flown notions, want money so much, that you are going to sell yourself to that little nonentity of a miser's daughter."

Brandon smiled, a rather peculiar smile, but did not speak.

"What do you mean?" asked Lady Elmslie watching his countenance. "Have you given the project up?"

"No, it has given me up."

"How?" she asked, opening her great lustrous eyes.

"Yesterday I tried my chance with the 'little nonentity,' who quietly begged to know why I wished to marry her, as I evidently did not feel anything more than the mildest regard for her—in short, ran me to earth as regards my mercenary motives."

"Why, she did not suppose a man like you could fall in love with her," exclaimed Lady Elmslie with scornfully curling lips.

"I really don't know what she supposes; but she is determined not to give herself for the asking," said Brandon, rising and coming over to lean against the mantelpiece. "I assure you she made me feel exceedingly small; of course I am not so 'high-flown' as to feel ashamed of my mercenary motives in the abstract, but when you stand face to face with a girl, and are compelled to admit that you seek her only as a means to possess yourself of her fortune, why, you don't feel quite like a gentleman."

"Of course you mean to try again?" she asked, watching him from under her down-dropped lids.

"Certainly not!" was the prompt reply. "I respect Miss Tracey's candour and straightforwardness

much too highly to attempt imposing pretended tenderness upon her. No, we have come to an understanding, we are to be fast friends."

"Ah, Ralph, and we know what that means!"

"I certainly do in this case. I never could feel more than a degree of friendliness for Miss Tracey, or indeed for any girl; moreover, Claude will want my help with her father, who is rather a formidable old monster. I must temporise with him; he is quite capable of cutting her off altogether."

"And then to whom will he leave his money?"—sharply.

"I do not know, the richest man of his acquaintance probably."

"Miss Tracey is not the only wealthy woman in England," said Lady Elmslie thoughtfully. "You must find another one."

"Not I; it is a rascally method of making one's fortune. If indeed I met with a rich woman who was sufficiently mature to view marriage as a partnership, and we could strike a fair bargain, I might entertain the idea of matrimony, but to win a young girl by false pretences and then let her find out, as she infallibly would, that she has allied herself with an extinct volcano, why, it would be an utter swindle;" and he laughed rather cynically.

"Why, Ralph! you talk as if you were an old man, and you are barely——"

"I am five and thirty all told!"

"Too young a man to talk about extinct fires," and she flashed a speaking glance into his eyes. "But I do not imagine Miss Tracey is calculated to rekindle them."

"Oh! that little episode is quite finished,—let us speak of your affairs."

"There is not much more to be said about them. I only want to be prepared for the worst at all points. I may ask your advice again later on. You must be my friend as well as Miss Tracey's; I have a prior claim on you."

"A claim! Yes, and on very much the same grounds." Brandon laughed frankly as he spoke.

The colour flushed quickly to the roots of Lady Elmslie's hair, but she replied coolly enough, "You are a splendid specimen of the modern *preux chevalier*, ready to champion the cause of all your distressed female friends. Now, Ralph, I must say good-night, I have been too long absent from poor Elmslie. I have watched by him the greater part of each night since he was taken ill, and shall continue to do so. Give me the names and addresses you spoke of."

Brandon went to a dainty writing-table in a recess near the fireplace and wrote them down.

"Either of these firms would serve your purpose," he said as he placed the paper in her hands.

"I shall take the first," she said. "Some unconscious preference in your mind gave it priority."

"Perhaps. By the way, why don't you ask one of the partners to come down to take your instructions?"

"Yes, that would be much the best plan. I will write to-night, then I can give the will into his keeping."

"Do so. Now I must not keep you from your invalid. Shall I see you to-morrow morning?"

"Yes, of course; why do you ask?"

"Because if I can do no more for you, I should

like to go by the earliest train to-morrow. I have some business in the afternoon which——"

"Ah! you have come to me then at your inconvenience? I ought not to have asked you. I fear I have grown selfish."

"I am always glad to be of use to you, and will come again if you need me."

"You are indeed a true knight. I will give you your breakfast at seven to-morrow. You shall catch the eight o'clock express, and be in your chambers before twelve. You travelled by a slow train to-day. You will find all the new magazines and a couple of naughty French novels on the table near the window, if you do not care to retire so soon."

"Thanks." He opened the door for her to pass out. "I trust Lord Elmslie may have a quiet night, and that you may not be much disturbed."

"I scarcely hope it." She hesitated for an instant, then bent her head, and went quickly down the corridor, for Brandon made no movement to shake hands with her.

"I wonder why she asked me to take this useless journey?" he said to himself, as he chose one of the graver periodicals and sat down by the fire. "She could have written all she has said quite well, and saved me some loss of time. What wonderful fools rich elderly men are, to marry fascinating young ladies who are full to the lips with life and only care for their money or what their money buys. Perhaps after all it is a fairer bargain than I imagine. What does an old eating, drinking, hunting, shooting animal, like Elmslie, care for a woman's heart or mind, or if

she has any? His pride is satisfied in the possession of the handsomest wife as well as the finest yacht, wines, horses and general surroundings of any man among his associates. If she conducts herself correctly, if she is good-humoured, obliging, complaisant, he has all he has paid for, and is content. Well, I hope Beatrice will get all she wants. What a terrible power money is, and always will be! Poor little Claude, even if her father leaves her all his money, I fear the one thing she desires is just what that money cannot secure. There is an extraordinary amount of steel in that young creature, but after all the strongest woman is only as strong as her weakest point, and some designing fortune-hunter who can ape the feeling she demands will find out the joints in her armour, and perhaps give her a stone when she asks for bread. Poor little Claude! She sorely needs a mother—a real mother! There are such things to be found, of course not only by those who want them most! As soon as I get back I must devise some plan of defence without deceiving that old money-making machine, Tracey. I thought fortune, or sufficient fortune for my purpose, was within my grasp; now it has slipped through my fingers, and my political schemes fade away. No use dreaming here; I'll to bed."

Lady Elmslie, listening to the stertorous breathing of her almost unconscious husband, thought feverishly of the curious crisis in her history which had come about so unexpectedly. "That she should have refused him, and just now. It is strange! How intolerable suspense is! How will it end? I wish I could relieve that poor man!" looking across to her

husband; "he must suffer! What use will life be to him? None, none, only an intolerable burden."

* * * * *

Now while Brandon and his hostess discussed her affairs, another scene of this homely drama was being enacted in Lichfield Terrace.

Mr. Tracey had had a good day—an unusually good-humoured day. He had not said much, but what he did say was placidly uttered without that sub-acidity of tone which made conversation with him somewhat a poignant pleasure. He seemed to enjoy his dinner, and even addressed a few observations on matters and things in general to his daughter. When the cloth had been removed and he had settled himself in his chair by the fire, Claude, much pleased to see him in a comparatively happy frame of mind, offered to read what morsels of the paper had remained unread. Her father declined the offer.

"I want to rest," he said. "Take your work out and sit there. What are you doing?"

"A pair of wristlets for you—they will be finished by the time the weather is fine enough for you to go out."

"H'm! ay! It will be a great undertaking." There was a pause. Claude crocheted steadily, not seeing that her father was peering at her with a strange searching glance. The old man was in fact bursting with curiosity. He had taken it into his head, from Brandon's note, from his prolonged stay the previous evening, from some indefinable interest in Claude's tone when she spoke of him, that his hopes were on the eve of fulfilment. Was he to have the blessed certainty that his beloved money would be carefully

kept and judiciously fructified, that he should have no more anxiety on that all-important subject? Brandon no doubt would tell all to him to-morrow, but how was he to wait for to-morrow? Why should he, when a question or two would unfold the whole mystery to him?

"Claude!" he exclaimed, sitting up and grasping the arms of his chair.

Claude started. He so rarely called her by her name that she felt almost frightened by the unwonted sound from his lips. She looked up quickly, but did not speak.

"Where do you think Brandon has gone?"

"Mr. Brandon?" repeated Claude, greatly surprised. "I have no idea whatever."

"He stayed here rather late yesterday."

"He did," said Claude, feeling her colour change at this approach to a subject she dreaded.

Her father watched her for a moment and resumed: "What were you talking about?" then leaning forward a little more he added very deliberately, "Did he ask you to marry him?"

Claude's heart seemed to stand still for a moment, and a desperate inclination to rush away out of the room, anywhere to hide, seized her, but she rallied herself, though she grew very white, and her lips trembled as she answered very distinctly, "Yes."

"Ah! hum! that's all right!" he returned, his thin hard face relaxing; "and what did you say? 'Thank you, sir, I will?'"

"I said, 'No, thank you.'" Claude felt frightened now the tremendous fact was told.

"'No, thank you'! What do you mean?" he said in

in a low hoarse voice. "Do you want to amuse yourself by getting up a little game and making Brandon play the despairing lover? He is far too sensible a fellow for such tomfoolery"—this with a sneering smile which nettled his daughter.

"Yes, I think he is," she said calmly. "I like him because he is honest, and does not pretend to care for me, so I hope we shall be good friends."

"Why, you little idiot! what do you expect, that you should refuse a clever sensible man who is a great deal too good for you? Answer me!"

"I have no doubt that Mr. Brandon is worthy of some one very superior to myself, and I might be happier with some one inferior to him!"

"I can't believe you are serious, that you are really in earnest!"

"I am indeed thoroughly in earnest."

"What is your objection to Brandon?"—struggling to keep down his wrath.

"That I do not love him, and he certainly does not love me."

"Bah! why should he wish to marry you if he did not love you?"

"Because he wants your money, or some of it."

"How do you know I have any money?" cried Mr. Tracey, his eyes blazing with fury at her opposition. "Has that idiot, your aunt, been cramming you with false notions?"

"She never speaks of your affairs. But I have an idea that you are rich, in money at all events," returned Claude, keeping herself as cool as she could, remembering that she must not betray Brandon's confidence.

"You have an idea! What business have you with ideas? When women have ideas they are generally wrong, they are only safe and endurable when they obey. It's bad enough to have a daughter who can be no use to you, and neither increases one's property nor takes care of it. It is your duty to obey me; I have done mine by you. I have found you a husband any girl might be glad to get, and I expect you to obey me, and accept him. If you do not, I shall cease to consider you my daughter. Why should I harbour you and pamper you in a comfortable home when you refuse to obey me as a father?"

"No threat can make me regret contradicting you more than I do. I am grateful to you, for I believe you meant to do your best for me, but it cannot be; nothing would induce me to marry Mr. Brandon!"

"You shall suffer for this, you obstinate, wrong-headed imbecile. I can leave you to want and beggary if I choose."

"Not beggary, father," said Claude, low but firmly. "I think I could get my own bread."

"Go and do it then," cried Tracey, raising himself in his chair, and speaking with a bitterness that made each syllable a curse. "You shall leave my house if you will not give me a child's obedience."

"I am willing and ready to obey and serve you, but not in such a matter as marriage. Of this I am the only judge, and nothing can induce me to give up my right of choice."

"Then take yourself and your rights out of my house. I'll waste no more money on you. Take your clothes and all you have robbed me of, and go where you like, do what you like! I'll never see your face

again, until you come and say 'I will marry Brandon'!"

"Are you really in earnest?" asked Claude, now thoroughly stirred to the deep lying strata of resolution which lurked below her surface softness, and she looked steadily into her father's angry eyes.

"As much in earnest as you are, as you'll feel to your cost."

"Then I shall say good-bye." She was struggling against her rising tears. "Let me go, as I had arranged, to my aunt and uncle to-morrow. I need not return unless you send for me." She stood up and put her work in her basket. Then she held out her hand and repeated "good-bye."

"Begone!" cried her amiable parent. "Leave my sight! You foolish, obstinate, worthless creature, how dare you cross me?"

Claude gazed at him for a moment in expressive amazement, then turned and left the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

"EXPULSION."

THE Selby family were highly delighted at having secured Claude even for a short visit of two days. She was a great favourite with them all. Her quietness was so far removed from inertia or indifference that every one told their secrets, their troubles, their little griefs against each other. Though her counsels of moderation were often overtly rejected, she was, unconsciously to herself, a strong influence. "Ask Claude!" "Just listen to what Claude says!" "I am sure Claude agrees with me!" were sentences very frequently heard in Major Selby's house. She had been rather delicate when she first went to live with them, and looked so white and sad and wistful, that Kate, conscious of her own strength, her abounding joyous vitality, took the poor little waif under her generous, affectionate protection, and remained her fast friend through life.

It was like emerging from the arctic regions into the glowing sunshine of a southern spring to come from Lichfield Terrace to her uncle's pleasant well-ordered house. Oh! if without neglect of duty she might stay there, and refuse to return even if her father asked her! Was there any chance of his doing so?

"Why, Claude, you are a capital girl for coming so early!" cried Mrs. Selby, who had just sat down

for a moment's recreation and a peep at the *Times*, after a severe scrutiny of the lower regions and issuing general orders for the day, when her niece arrived. "Kate and Janet will be delighted; they are dusting the drawing-room, or attending to the conservatory. My dear!" breaking off and looking closely at her guest after bestowing a kiss of welcome on her —"you look like a ghost! What has gone wrong?"

"I have been obliged to contradict my father," returned Claude, with rather a watery smile, "so he was very cross and said unpleasant things, but I have been foolish to fret myself so much. However, I may stay a little longer, which atones a great deal. Now do not let us talk about unpleasant things; I do want to enjoy myself for a little while!" She was determined not to tell the whole truth: she felt curiously, perhaps foolishly ashamed of being turned out of her father's house, and profoundly averse to let her aunt and cousins know that her refusal of Brandon was the cause of it. She specially wanted to keep that chapter of the history dark. Mrs. Selby perceived that Claude did not wish to continue the subject.

"Very well, my dear, you shall enjoy yourself if we can manage it." Then going to the door she called, "Katie, Janet, come down, here is Claude!" Immediately there was a joyous cry, a soft, rustling, rushing sound, and the two girls came flying downstairs.

"Oh, Claude, I am so glad. How did you manage to come so soon?"

"What fun, Claude! Have you only that little bag? You must dress, you know, to-night; we have

a grand stage box. Isn't it a pity Sir Philip is going somewhere else abroad, and cannot come with us?" Thus Janet.

"My dress is coming; Tibbets promised to send it by Carter Paterson early."

"And Claude has leave to stay a few days," added Mrs. Selby.

"That's jolly!" from both girls. "Why, you are learning to manage your father at last! But, Claude, you are looking as if you had cried your eyes out!"

"Never mind my eyes, Kate dear! I am ready to laugh as much as you like this evening."

"You are quite an object, Claude," said Janet uncompromisingly, as she gazed steadily at her cousin.

"Don't be rude, Janet!" cried her mother. "Take Claude up to her room, and let her see all we have done to the drawing-room since she was here. Kate is getting on rapidly with the mantel border; it will be beautiful."

"I want to make something pretty for your room, aunt, if Kate will help me to begin."

"Come along, Claude; we have a delightful new duet. You must come and hear that before anything else!" and Janet slipped her arm inside Claude's and carried her off.

Kate stayed behind for a few minutes.

"Does she not look wretched, mother?"

"Miserable!"

"She must have had a tremendous row with the ogre. I hope she did not knock under to him!"

"Claude is not of the sort that caves in easily."

"What! Poor quiet little Claude?"

"Yes, poor quiet little Claude!"

"Won't dad be vexed when he sees Claude's face?"

"She will look better by luncheon time. Your father has gone to Whiteley's for me, and he will not be in till one o'clock."

"I wish I had known, I should have asked him to buy me some more blue silk and gold braid."

"My dear Kate, you must not spend your money on that border!"

"Indeed I do not. You know I had saved up a lot before we came over, so I have a right to do what I like with my savings."

"I trust and hope there will be no real split between Claude and her father," said Mrs. Selby, as she resumed her paper. "There is so much in his power. Why, I should be ready to tear my hair if he left his money away from her, which he is quite capable of doing!"

"What an appalling old sinner!" cried Kate, as she ran off after the others.

The three girls enjoyed being together, they had so much to talk about—recollections, anticipations, projects of work and play.

"We are going to a real party to-morrow night," said Janet, when Claude had been furnished with a duster and they had set diligently to work to finish regulating the conservatory. "You must come and see our dresses. Mine is new, or nearly new, and Kate's has been done up beautifully. It is the white one with fresh wild roses."

"That is delightful. Where are you going?"

"You remember General Bolton and his young wife at Dresden? Well, they are living in Inverness Ter-

race now, and as it is to be a mixed juvenile and grown-up business for Geraldine's twelfth birthday, I am to go."

"I do wish you were coming too, Claude," cried Kate. "But it was rather a sudden affair. Father met the General three or four days ago, and then Mrs. Bolton came and invited us."

"I could not have gone if I had been asked, Kate. I have no evening dress excepting my old pink frock, and I have quite outgrown it," and poor Claude was thankful for the occupation which enabled her to turn her back on her companions, as she thought how little heart she had for pleasant things, outcast as she was.

Her cousins were too full of their own anticipations to notice her.

"It really is a jolly shame, as Tom would say," exclaimed Kate, "to see how tightly you are kept. You are too soft, too meek, Claude! If your father were mine, I—I don't know what I should do."

"That is exactly my case, Kate," returned Claude.

"There is to be music first, and dancing after," resumed Janet, who was very full of her London party. "Kate and I are to sing a duet, and she says she feels rather nervous about it, but I do not believe her."

"Thank you," returned Kate, laughing. Then, after a pause, she added, "I wonder if—no, I don't suppose he will."

"What do you mean?" cried Janet.

"Oh, nothing; only it would be very nice if Sir Philip Brandon were to be there, but I don't suppose he will."

'Not he," said Janet, decidedly. "He is a very big man, I believe, and goes to quite the aristocratic and distinguished houses, Captain O'Hara says."

"Well, General Bolton is a distinguished man."

"Yes, but in a different way."

"Why, Janet, how have you learned the difference?" asked Claude. "Your ferns are coming on very well, and I fancy you will have a good show of hyacinths. I wish we had a little conservatory, but——" She paused abruptly, remembering that perhaps she might never return to her father's house again.

"I do wish you were living with us altogether, Claude," cried Kate, suddenly becoming alive to the unusual degree of melancholy in her cousin's voice and bearing, and she put an arm tenderly round her. "Come, this place looks all right; now come and hear our duet."

* * * * *

Tibbets was faithful, and sent Claude's dress, so all were ready by the appointed time.

The party started in high spirits, full of interest in their first theatrical experience in London.

"Going to the theatre is a very serious undertaking in England," said Mrs. Selby, as they jogged Drury Lanewards. "It is evidently not a familiar, congenial amusement, or people would simplify matters. Think of the worry of dressing, the cost of cab hire, in addition to one's places! You need not expect much play-going, young ladies, unless you are satisfied with omnibuses and the 'hupper succle.'"

"Oh! I don't mind," cried Kate, "where I go so long as I have Dad with me, and so long as I see the

play. But it is good of Sir Philip to get us a box. I wish Tom could have come."

"He would have been one too many," said Mrs. Selby. "I wish the driver would go faster. We shall keep your father waiting."

They were rather early, and were much struck with the immensity of the house, also greatly interested in watching the audience assemble. At last the curtain drew up, and then everything, save the stage, was forgotten. The beauty of the scenery, the perfection of the appointments, called forth great admiration, but, apart from the gorgeous decorations and the good looks of the ballet girls, they saw little to please. Indeed, the jests and tricks of the clown, the patter and topical songs of the comic characters, the thousand allusions to political and social events, seemed to them vulgar and incomprehensible, while the music was of a very low order indeed.

"How much more charming the Marchenspiele were in Germany," said Claude. "I wish that horrid clown would go away, though he is very funny." Here she remarked that Kate's bright eyes grew still brighter, and a faint colour rose in her cheek as she bent her head to some one in the stalls.

Following the direction of her cousin's eyes, Claude recognised Sir Philip Brandon, who was standing up during an interval between the acts, and looking towards their box. Beside him was a gentleman rather below middle height, slight and spare, with a short, shrewd face, that looked as if some giant hand had squeezed it in its infancy. His complexion was weather-beaten and russet; his somewhat scanty red hair, a good deal powdered with grey, was divided in

the middle, and brushed into a fierce-looking upstanding fringe at either side; while a pair of wiry moustaches were trained and stiffened into a rigid, horizontal line right and left of his mouth. As Claude observed him through her aunt's glasses, he looked up and bowed with a smile, which showed brilliantly white teeth, and twinkled drolly in his light grey, laughing eyes.

"There's Brandon with O'Hara," said Major Selby, who had just discovered them. "Didn't expect to see those fellows at such a juvenile entertainment."

"How much nicer Captain O'Hara looks in evening dress!" said Kate.

"Fine feathers, hey?" said her father. "You ought to see him in his jockey cap and gay silk jacket! He is the smartest light-weight on the turf."

"Why, is he a jockey?"

"A gentleman jock."

"Are gentlemen jockeys?" asked Janet, in a wondering tone. Before her father could answer the door of the box opened to admit Sir Philip Brandon and Captain O'Hara.

"I thought you were to be in Paris to-night?" observed Mrs. Selby, as she shook hands with the former.

"Yes, I had intended to start yesterday, but some lingering reluctance has kept me here. I hope, Miss Selby, you have not been bored with our somewhat gothic entertainment."

"Oh! I am never bored," returned Kate, looking up with a sparkling smile, that seemed to flash forth from some inner fount of sunshine. "I am very

much amused, and so much obliged to you for getting us this delightful box!"

"You return the pleasure with compound interest," said Sir Philip, with an admiring glance. "Later on you must see something better than this," and he passed on to greet Claude, which he did with more formal politeness and less irrepressible joyousness. "Ah! Miss Tracey, this is an unexpected pleasure. Is Ralph Brandon with you?"

Though Claude was a very self-possessed little woman, this question coming so soon after the events of the last two days disturbed her, and to her infinite annoyance she felt the colour stealing up into her cheek.

"I think Mr. Brandon is out of town."

"Well, I met him in the Strand to-day," returned Sir Philip, "so you must make him explain, Miss Tracey."

"He has returned then," said Claude, with animation as she thought: "He will persuade my father to send for me. If he does not, I will never return."

Sir Philip placed himself behind Kate's chair after a polite word or two to Janet, while Major Selby and O'Hara talked and laughed together at the back of the box.

"And what do you think of the London stage, Miss Selby?"

"This is not quite a fair specimen. I must see more. The scenery is very beautiful, but——"

"Ah! I know all that is meant by that disparaging 'but.' Tell me, do you still find London dull, as compared with Dresden and its wild dissipations?"

"Oh, no! we are actually going to a dance—a sort of dance, to-morrow."

"A sort of dance? The Carmagnole, or the Czardash, or what?" asked Sir Philip, smiling as he gazed into the bright eyes uplifted to his.

"A mixed sort of dance—children and music and all that."

"Are the children served for supper?" asked Sir Philip gravely.

"I hope not! They are to dance with the old people."

"Yourself amongst them?"

"Yes. Then Janet and I are to sing."

"Ah! there is an attraction! Is Miss Tracey going?"

"No, poor dear! Her father is such a dreadful ogre. I fancy he has been particularly detestable just now, for Claude looked so miserable to-day, but don't say anything about it."

"Not for a kingdom! You can trust me with any amount of secrets, Miss Selby. Racks and thumbscrews would not force them from me. I must try and see this ogre that Ralph keeps under lock and key. Ralph Brandon has appropriated him and his daughter. By the way he is some relation of yours?"

"He is my uncle, because he married my aunt, poor soul! I don't wonder she died young!"

"Is that the way you would slip out of an uncongenial marriage?"

"Oh, dear, no! I should murder the disagreeable husband in some delicate, kindly way, and live happy ever after."

"By Jove! I believe you would, and to die by

your hands in a kindly way would not be an unpleasant ending."

"Pooh! nonsense," said Kate, but she blushed and turned her eyes towards the box opposite them.

"Do you think you could get me an invitation to this fascinating entertainment?"

"I am afraid you would be bored at such a party."

"Not if you promise to do a little kindly killing."

"Very well," said Kate saucily, "I will ask my mother;" and bending forward she attracted Mrs. Selby's attention with, "Mummy dear, could you get Sir Philip Brandon an invitation to the Boltons'?"

"Don't you know General Bolton, Sir Philip?" asked Mrs. Selby with a smile—a rather wintry smile.

"No, unfortunately mine is not a military club, you see, and——"

"I am afraid the time is too short and my acquaintance with Mrs. Bolton is too slight to permit my asking for any invitation," said Mrs. Selby.

"But if you say that the young man recommended is active, industrious, respectable, willing to dance diligently for his supper, etc., she might seriously incline to your petition."

"I daresay she might, but I scarcely like to make the experiment; moreover, I am quite sure you would not care for a milk and watery, semi-juvenile festivity!"

"Your mother is too severe!" he whispered to Kate, as Mrs. Selby turned to answer an observation from O'Hara. "Does she insinuate that I prefer brandy and water orgies? I feel dreadfully wounded! However, we will see what a little resolution may do. Will you promise me the first waltz, Miss Selby?"

Kate looked at him, surprised and amused. "How can you manage to go there? I don't expect to see you, and I am not going to lose my waltz."

"I promise you shall not!" cried Sir Philip eagerly, urged on by Mrs. Selby's refusal to ask for an invitation.

"By George! Mrs. Selby, you and your charming daughters light up this side of the house. That husband of yours is in clover, with three charming women to take out!"

"Perhaps Major Selby finds it an *embarras de richesse* to have so many on his hands," said Mrs. Selby, laughing at O'Hara's flatteries.

"Ah! you are an awful infidel. It's distressing to see the mother of a couple of such daughters given over to unbelief." Lowering his voice—"Who is the pale little girl in the corner?"

"My niece, Miss Tracey."

"Ah! now—yes, I have heard Sir Philip mention her. She is—or her father is—a friend of Ralph Brandon. Do you know him? He's a snuff-the-moon of a fellow, but deuced clever, and not a bad sort. He was quite a society man; a great ally of Lady Elmslie, who is in the first flight, you know. Lovely woman, too! They say old Elmslie is going off—had a stroke of apoplexy, or paralysis, or something. Brandon had a paper in the 'Atlas' on Indian affairs which made quite a sensation some time ago. Didn't read it myself—hate those kind of contributions. Facts and figures, you know, two confounded bores, but Brandon's head is hard enough to knock against such a cairn."

"I can scarcely say I know him, Captain O'Hara,

but he seemed rather an attractive man, though very quiet and grave."

"Oh! exactly—butter wouldn't melt in his mouth; still I shouldn't like to be the butter, he might bolt it even in a congealed condition if——"

"Come, O'Hara, tear yourself away if you can," interrupted Sir Philip. "We must get back to our places, the curtain will be up in a minute. We have got to get through a lot of gorgeousness in the next scene." With a smile and a bow he left the box, followed by O'Hara.

Claude in her corner had overheard most of the talk, and her thoughts flew away from her surroundings. Had Brandon returned? Would he interfere on her behalf? Would he save her the pain and shame of telling Aunt Selby that she was turned out of her father's house because she refused to marry a man who was ready to take her as an unavoidable incumbrance on her father's money! She always tried to make her father appear better than he was, and to confess he had behaved so brutally would have been a great mortification. Then, to admit that Brandon was an ordinary fortune-hunter was not to be thought of.

Though Aunt Selby had a profound sense of the value of money, she knew what it could and could not buy, and Claude had an intense dread of subjecting the curious passages between herself and Brandon to her aunt's scrutinising eye.

Would Brandon come to her rescue? Why should he trouble himself about people who could be nothing to him? If he really meant to renounce all pretensions to her hand, and all hopes of her father's money, he

might simply drop their acquaintance. If he continued it, he could only be actuated by a disinterested desire to help herself. Another motive might have been suggested by deeper worldly wisdom, but Claude had the higher wisdom of instinct, and believed that if Brandon was anxious to secure the advantages of wealth, he was also capable of disinterestedness.

The stage claimed her attention, and she was glad to turn away from the contemplation of her own troubles.

It was all over at last. Sir Philip Brandon and O'Hara awaited them near the door of the box, and assisted Major Selby to find a cab—Sir Philip's last words to Kate, as he handed her into the vehicle, being, "Remember, the first waltz to-morrow night!" Kate laughed, but made no reply.

* * * * *

The next day was one of delightful excitement. Claude could not find time to worry herself, for Kate and Janet's frocks had to be completed, and the hundred and one small accessories of evening dress, which are rarely ready for those who go but seldom to evening parties, to be prepared. So the three girls worked and chatted gaily together in Kate's room, Mrs. Selby occasionally looking in to counsel and exhort.

"Mummy," exclaimed Kate on one of those occasions, "why did you refuse to ask for an invitation for Sir Philip Brandon? He dances so well."

"I did not care to put myself out of my way for him."

"Don't you like him? I think he is so nice!"

"Yes, nice enough," returned her mother carelessly, "but we are not likely to see much of his nicety! I

hear his place is to be let, and he is going off to retrench abroad. I have no patience with spendthrifts who throw away the advantages of their position for the sake of vanity or absurd self-indulgence. Come along, Janet—I want you to help me in the store-room."

Kate looked rather thoughtful when she was left alone with Claude. "I am rather sorry for Sir Philip," she said presently. "He is very pleasant, if he is thoughtless." Then after a pause, she exclaimed, with a slight blush and a little laugh, "I wonder if he will succeed in getting an invitation to Mrs. Bolton's party—it would be great fun to meet him, but he will very likely forget all about it."

"Very likely," echoed Claude placidly. "I suppose he has heaps of places to go to. Mr. Brandon seems always engaged in the evening."

Kate was silent for a minute or two, then she said, "At all events my father says we shall have plenty of partners, as the General knows lots of Indian officers, and they dance well. I hope they have good large rooms."

"Yes, I hope so," said Claude with hearty sympathy.

"I do wish you were coming, Claude. I am sure you would enjoy it."

"I should like to go," with a sigh. "I begin to doubt if I shall ever go to dances or anything pleasant. It seems to me that to live in Lichfield Terrace is enough to cut me off from the world, and fun of any kind."

"I am sure you are miserable about some-

thing, dear Claude. You might tell me?" coaxingly.

"Yes, I am pretty miserable; and I may tell you some day, but not now."

"It is Mr. Tracey's fault, I am sure."

"Well, he is very disagreeable," said Claude, heartily, "but——"

The entrance of the smiling housemaid, carrying a basket full of lovely hothouse flowers and ferns, interrupted her. "They are for you, miss," she said, presenting them to Kate, who perceived her own name, written in a clerkly hand on a card attached to the handle of the basket.

"Oh! how beautiful! how delicious!" cried Kate, bending over the blossoms in high delight. "I am sure poor dear Dad has sent these. How angry Mummy will be with him for spending his money. But they are so lovely! and quite enough for Janet too! See what exquisite ferns! It is almost a sin to wear them in hot rooms. I will give you some to take home, Claude. I know how you love flowers."

"Oh, I shall enjoy them here, Kate. I hope to stay a little longer."

"That's right, dear. It looks as if you had got the best of it with your father."

"I rather think I have had the worst," said Claude, and then blushed at having so far forgotten herself.

Kate laughed heartily, and, before the pleasant sound died away, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," cried Kate.

Major Selby entered. "Well, my dears," he began,

then interrupted himself. "Why, Kitty, darling, what a fine posy!"

"Don't pretend innocence, you dear old impostor. You know all about them."

"'Pon my soul, I do not; I haven't the ghost of an idea where they came from. Haven't you?"

"No, Dad! I should think it a mistake, only there is my name and address on the card."

"I would give them to you with all my heart if my pockets were a trifle better lined."

"Well, you shall have a nice button-hole for yourself, Dad."

"Thank you, dear. Now I am going to the club, and your mother wants to know what time we ought to dine."

"Oh! at seven, as usual. We need not start till nine—we are never long dressing."

"Very well," said the Major, and left the room, while Kate busied herself putting her floral treasures in water. Then she stood gazing at them, the bright colour slowly mantling on her cheek, as she murmured, "Who can have sent me these beautiful flowers?"

CHAPTER IX.

RECONCILIATION.

CLAUDE had played Cinderella to her cousins, and helped them to dress with the heartiest good-will. She was quite proud of Kate's beauty and becoming toilette, and glad to see Janet look unusually well. She had assisted to wrap them up (for it was a chilly February evening), and kissed her hand to them from the hall door; then, her "occupation being o'er," she went back to the dining-room, where a good fire glowed and crackled. Taking up a volume of travels, which had supplied the Major with literature for a considerable period, she looked at the clock. "Only ten minutes past nine," she said to herself, "I cannot go to bed yet awhile, I should lie awake."

The whole family, including Tom, had been bidden to Mrs. Bolton's festivity, and their early attendance specially requested; so Claude settled herself for an hour or more of quiet reading. Her eyes, however, only followed the lines, she could not fix her wandering thoughts. If her father persisted in banishing her, what was she to do? She could not be a burden to her aunt, and, even if successful, it would be some time before she could earn enough to pay for her board. Mrs. Selby would be just and kind, but not quixotically generous, if——

Here the servant entered with a card, and said, "Please, ma'am, will you see the gentleman?"

"Ralph Brandon," cried Claude, reading the name on the card. "Oh! yes, yes, show him in," and she went forward to meet him with outstretched hand.

"Late as it is, I thought I must try to see you," said Brandon, holding it kindly for a moment. "I have come from Lichfield Terrace with a flag of truce."

"I knew you would help me—I felt you would come!" cried Claude, sitting down again in her uncle's capacious chair, while Brandon drew one beside her.

"Yes, of course you counted on me. I have seldom been so profoundly annoyed as I am now, at being made a source of injustice and positive injury to you. You must let me tell my story from the beginning. I could not manage to call on your father yesterday, but I sent a line asking permission to dine with him to-day. I found him exceedingly moody, and then I asked for you, and he said you were paying a visit to Mrs. Selby. I was glad to hear this, for the monotony of your life at home must be rather oppressive. It was not till after dinner and we were alone, that Mr. Tracey informed me of his displeasure with you, and, I must say, his extraordinary, his most unjustifiable conduct. I was right, you see, in warning you against letting him know your objection to—to his matrimonial scheme, until I had prepared the way."

"But I could not avoid telling him, Mr. Brandon. He asked me distinctly if you had asked me to marry

you, and if I had said 'Yes.' What could I say? Then he was so desperately angry that——it makes my heart beat to think of it."

Brandon murmured something to himself. "I need not tell you that I was exceedingly angry too. I told him what I thought, very plainly, but I found him harder than I could have expected. Finally I told him that if he did not recall you, and make an apology, I would never enter his doors again. He saw that I was in earnest, and after a little further argument, he wrote this"—taking a note from his breast-pocket—"which I hope is satisfactory."

Claude opened the envelope, and glanced at the contents, which were brief. "It does not exactly read like the outpouring of a repentant heart."

Brandon smiled too.

"My dear Claude,"—it ran—"I wish you to return home. I have perhaps been too hasty, though the provocation I received was great.

"Your affectionate father,

"J. Tracey."

"You will accept this?" asked Brandon, looking earnestly at her.

"I will. I shall get nothing better, and it will do." She spoke very quietly, but he saw that her lips quivered.

"Believe me, I have been extremely distressed and scandalised by your father's conduct. I fear you will have such unpleasant associations with my unlucky self, that you may not like to see me at your father's table."

"You are mistaken," said Claude, looking candidly and kindly into his eyes. "Now that we thoroughly understand each other, I am glad to see you, perhaps selfishly glad, for I feel that your friendship is valuable to me, and I thank you heartily for your help. It has been a horrible time altogether."

"I can well believe it, Miss Tracey."

"Oh! pray call me Claude. 'Miss Tracey' puts me so far away. Yes, it has all been dreadful! I have been so angry, so ashamed. Right or wrong, it is a disgrace to be turned out of my father's house. I could not go about explaining the reason, while the fact would be indisputable. I have felt such an impostor these two wretched days, for of course my good aunt and uncle had no idea why I was able to stay on here. I could not explain everything to them." A soft colour rose in her cheek while she spoke.

"No, of course not, I understand," said Brandon hastily. "It was very discreet of you to keep your expulsion dark! It simplifies matters."

"It was not discretion, it was instinct," returned Claude. "Now I shall not go home until the day after to-morrow."

"Very well, take as long a holiday as you can. By the way, Mr. Tracey said he hoped you would return as if nothing had happened."

"Does my father fancy I shall fall on his neck and weep?" asked Claude, with a contemptuous curl on her lips. "He is a good deal mistaken." Then, with a sudden change of tone, "Poor old man. I would give the world, I would give all the fortune he may leave me, if he would let me love him! Oh! what

an arid desert that house is, or rather would be, but for poor dear Tibbets! I do love Tibbets."

"Yet I can see that your father misses you, Claude"—he brought out the name very softly and kindly—"I think he likes you as well as he can like anything outside his money."

"Fancy being second to filthy lucre!"

"Filthy lucre takes precedence of most things and sentiments with most people," said Brandon, smiling.

"Yes, I know you think so."

"Is that not an unnecessarily unkind cut, and an infringement of our contract into the bargain?"

"Perhaps so! I beg your pardon."

"I will grant it if you promise never to upbraid me again."

"I did not mean to upbraid," said Claude, and then paused abruptly.

"Very well, we will bury the hatchet. Now pray write a few lines to your father, stating that you are willing to return to him."

"Can you not take a message from me?"

"It is rather late. I could post a note for him."

Claude thought for a moment, then she said, "I will write," and, going to her aunt's sacred writing-table, traced a few lines and took them to Brandon for inspection. He looked over them, and said, "All right, no 'gush' here, certainly." Claude put the note in an envelope, closed it, and gave it back to Brandon.

"I suppose I ought to go now," he said, rather discontentedly. "Are you all alone here?"

"I am. My aunt, uncle and cousins have gone to a dance."

"Don't you like dancing? Why did you not accompany them?"

"You see, I had no dress, and, worse still, no invitation."

"That is too bad! When you return to Lichfield Terrace you must take command of the establishment, invite your young friends, and enjoy yourself."

Claude shook her head. "I do not think I should ever attempt such a feat. There are some things I dare not do."

"I begin to think you do not know the extent of your own pluck. Now what shall you do when I am gone?"

"I shall go to bed and sleep—because you have removed the cause of my sleeplessness. I greatly dreaded having to tell everything to my aunt and uncle. They judge my father rather severely."

"Well, it is all right now—so I will say good-night."

"Good-night," echoed Claude—"and thank you heartily."

They shook hands in a friendly fashion, and Brandon started to walk towards his own abode, until he found a hansom.

"I shall not again believe in my own penetration," he thought, as he pressed on steadily, "after setting down this keenly observant natured little girl as too mild, too unemotional to care for more than a quiet, well-ordered home and a polite, friendly husband. Who knows what fires lurk under that calm exterior? She is the reverse of all I imagined her to be, and had she accepted me, would have led me along a thorny path. Yet I fancy there is a touch of nobility

in her nature. She is so frank and fresh, I hope some Prince Charming may turn up to woo and win the dainty little lady, and that she may live happy ever after."

Meanwhile Claude, with a sense of deep thankfulness, stole away to bed, her last thoughts being a prayer to God for the enlightenment of her father, for the happiness and success of her good friend Ralph Brandon, before she passed into balmy dreamless sleep.

* * * * *

When Claude entered the dining-room the next morning, she found her aunt at her post pouring out tea for Tom, who was the only other member of the family present. Mrs. Selby looked as fresh as if she had gone to bed at her usual hour.

"Had you a nice party, aunt?" asked Claude, as she sat down to her tea and toast.

"A capital party, Claude. A little crowded at first, but when the juveniles cleared off, it was all that could be desired. There was a sort of musical interlude while the school boys and girls went to supper, and Kate's song and the duet seemed to give great satisfaction. We all wished heartily for you."

"I say, Claude, I had such a stunning partner," said Tom, rather indistinctly, as his mouth was full, "Such a jolly girl! with a pair of black eyes that looked through you, and a first-rate figure. She gave me six dances—what do you think of that? I can tell you some of the other chaps were mad jealous."

"Tom, you are growing conceited. I thought you were a modest boy," said Claude, laughing.

"Boy, indeed! I like that."

"Tom had a more important introduction than to

the bewitching Miss Fenwick," said his mother. "Mrs. Bolton's brother is chairman of the East African Bank. She introduced Tom to him, and they had quite a long talk. Now if this man would only give Tom an appointment abroad, his fortune would be made!"

"And then you might come home and marry your charming partner, Tom," said Claude.

"Oh! she'll be 'wooed and married and a',' long before I come back," returned Tom, laughing. "Now I must be off—I shall be late as it is." Bidding them a hasty "good-morning," he disappeared.

"I was not alone after you left," said Claude. "You had hardly gone when Mr. Brandon called. He brought a note from my father, who wants me to return home—so I promised to go to-morrow."

"That is positively shabby!" cried Mrs. Selby. "I thought you were to stay a few days."

"So did I—but it is better I should go."

"Yes, it is," returned Mrs. Selby thoughtfully.

Then Major Selby came in, soon followed by Kate and Janet, who were instantly informed that Claude had been summoned home, and loud were the exclamations and lamentations.

"I wonder he sent for you," said Janet, who was the cynic of the family. "Is it pure tyranny, or because you read aloud well?"

"Perhaps a little of both," quoth Kate, laughing, such a joyous laugh! "Well, he must let you come again soon. I will make a raid on Lichfield Terrace, and ask him myself."

"I wish you would," cried Claude, who seemed to catch the infection of her cousin's good spirits.

"He never could say 'No' to you, I suppose," said Major Selby smiling on his first favourite, Kate. "And so you had a smart young man to amuse you in your loneliness?" continued the Major, addressing Claude.

"Yes, he brought me my order of recall."

"It always puzzles me how he comes to be so thick with your father, Claude."

"It puzzles me too, uncle."

"I hope he will not prove *too* thick," said Mrs. Selby rather solemnly. "I can't help thinking he expects to make something out of this curious friendship."

"Well, I must say Mr. Brandon gives me the idea of a high-minded man, though I have only seen him twice," cried Kate.

"You are easily taken in with an imposing exterior, my dear," said her mother. "I too am a good deal taken with Mr. Brandon, but I don't believe him superior to mundane matters."

"Well, perhaps not," returned Kate indifferently. "Claude, will you help me to put away our things after breakfast? Janet is going out with Dad."

"Yes, of course, Kate."

When the two girls were safe upstairs, Janet gone out and Mrs. Selby in the kitchen, the true story of the dance was revealed to Claude, while they folded in silver paper the dresses and shoes and gloves and little cloaks which made so brave a show last night.

"Oh, dear Claude, it was a heavenly party," exclaimed Kate, her large lustrous brown eyes radiant with delightful recollections.

"Tell me all about it, Kate dear!"

"Well, when we first went in, the children were all dancing, and we danced with some boys who had no partners. Then Mrs. Bolton sent them down to supper, and a funny little man with long wild black hair played something I had never heard before, on the violoncello, quite divinely! I was dying to tell him how delicious it was. Mrs. Bolton, however, came and begged us to sing; so Janet and I gave them our famous duet. It was not so bad, and people seemed to like it; and as I turned away from the piano, I was surprised to see that Captain O'Hara was introducing Sir Philip Brandon to Mrs. Bolton. I didn't know what to do to keep from laughing, there was such an all-conquering air about him! Then he came straight over to me and said, 'Here I am, you see, Miss Selby, to claim that waltz.' So I told him I had never promised anything, and we had some chaffing about it, but he took my card, and put down his name for seven or eight dances, or tried, but I would not let him. I knew Mummy would be angry if I did, though I would far, far rather dance with him than with any one else there. Then he sat down by mother, and talked, and made her laugh, and Captain O'Hara asked both Janet and me for dances. He dances not badly, a little too active and jumpy, like a parched pea, and he is so funny! It seems he is an old friend of the Boltons (indeed he happens to be an old friend of every one's), so when Mummy refused to ask for an invitation for Sir Philip, Captain O'Hara offered to bring him. Then the music struck up; they played some lovely waltzes, old and new, beautiful swinging airs, half sad, with fine chords and

changes here and there. I could have gone on for ever."

"Yes, you can keep up very long I know," said Claude.

"Oh! it was not that exactly, but Sir Philip's step suited mine. Indeed, he said he never knew what dancing meant before, and just think of all the splendid balls he must have been at. But he was in earnest, I felt he was. Then he took me down to supper, and told me lots of—oh—nonsense! and we laughed rather too much, I am afraid, for I saw Mummy looking gravely at me. Then he danced with Janet and the daughter of the house. When he came back to me, I was just going to dance with my father, and I would not give him up. I really do like to dance with Dad—he is a dear, and steady as a rock, and he enjoys dancing with me. All the time, Sir Philip stood looking at us. After that, I had to waltz with young Bolton. He is in some Indian Cavalry, and is very nice, but quite different. After that he had to dance with a Lady Emily something, but Sir Philip took me away to rest in the conservatory, and then he told me he was an unfortunate devil (yes, that is what he said), and obliged to let his beautiful place and wander abroad. I did my best to comfort him, and said it was very pleasant on the Continent, that we had been very happy there, and that I really did not think he was so much to be pitied; then he said I was a hard-hearted witch, so I told him not to call me names. I grew half afraid I was getting too familiar with a stranger. You know mother says I am too unguarded, but I have an odd feeling that I can say and do what I like with Sir

Philip Brandon—he is not such a 'grand seigneur' as his cousin, but oh! he *is* nice! He grew more melancholy, however, just when I caught the sound of another delightful waltz; so I exclaimed that it would be much better to come and dance than to make himself miserable. Then he jumped up and said I was right, that a dance with me was enough to make any man forget his troubles. Then we had such a waltz, the most delightful I ever had, and the party wound up with a cotillon—an impromptu one, you know. I was sorry to come away, but Sir Philip was sorry too. He put us into a cab, then he and Captain O'Hara walked away together." Then, lowering her voice, Kate added, "Do you know, Claude, I believe Sir Philip sent me the flowers, because I know no one else who is at all likely to send them; and, talking of his place, he said, evidently without thinking, Those flowers I sent you first, were from Fairford, so these were bought in London.' Was it not nice of him? Though he is a fine gentleman, there is a sort of boyishness about him that makes it so easy to get on. Oh! I am sorry he is going away." She stopped abruptly.

"You must have had a very pleasant evening indeed, Katie dear," replied Claude, a little vaguely uneasy at her cousin's account—which disturbed her, she knew not why. "Perhaps Sir Philip may not go abroad, perhaps he may stay in London, and send you more bouquets,"—with an arch look.

"Ah, that is not likely," said Kate, and proceeded to pack away her belongings in their proper places with much care.

Kate might have thought Philip Brandon's stay in

London still more unlikely could she have heard the conversation between her admirer and his faithful ally, as they strolled towards town, looking for a conveyance.

"Begad, Brandon, you have made an ass of yourself this evening!"

"Many thanks for the compliment. How do you make that out?"

"It's you that made it as plain, and a good deal plainer, than the nose on your face! Why, a lad out of college couldn't have made a greater show of himself than you did, gazing at that girl, and following her about, as if you were drawn by a magnet, faith!"

"Exactly so!" returned Sir Philip, lighting a cigarette. "You just describe the effect she produces. I never remember having been so hard hit before. I daresay I did make an ass of myself; and will be worse, I suspect, every time I see her. I am a double-distilled idiot. I am ashamed, O'Hara, by Jove, I blush (metaphorically) for being such an ass, but I couldn't help it; and then I feel so heavenly young, restored to a boyish sense of intense enjoyment in everything. Why, I could hug that keen-eyed mother of hers, who somehow seems to warn me off the premises."

"It's an extra loving heart you have under your dress shirt," said O'Hara drily. "One comfort is, that this sort of thing evaporates as quickly as it comes."

"Yes, very likely, but it's delicious while it lasts."

"Ay! you can foresee the end of it. But do you

think that dark-eyed darlin' does? Begad, at her age, and with the upbringing she has had, she hasn't come to know yet that there's a 'to-morrow' in love or life. I don't blame you for losing your head about her. I myself, dry old chip as I am, feel some ten years lifted from me when she is smiling into my eyes. Now, Brandon, if you are a true man, cut and run. Take the mail to-morrow night. I don't mind coming with you myself—there will be nothing doing for another month, and I think you may be satisfied with playing the fool. Don't go a step lower, and play the devil!"

"Don't talk such infernal bosh, O'Hara. If you fancy Miss Selby is a soft simpleton ready to fall in love with the first man who looks admiringly at her, you are mistaken. There's a dash of salt in her that completes her charm. Why, I told her what an unfortunate devil I was, obliged to run away and screw on the Continent, partly as a warning, partly to win a melting glance of pity from her sweet eyes—but deuce a one she gave me—she said there was no hardship in that, the Continent is a pleasant place."

"Bravo, Miss Kate! More power to you! Now, wouldn't it be Satan's own doing to tamper with a girl like that? Not that you could do much mischief, but would you darken an hour of her life? And if you did marry——"

"Oh! marriage is rather too serious a termination to think of."

"Ay! you'd have a difficult story to tell! My dear boy, you are as weak—as—as an Irishman! You like the pleasant thing, but shirk the unpleasant

results. Faith, Tom Moore was right when he wrote—

> " 'The lovely toy so fiercely sought,
> Has lost its charm by being caught,'

whether it is caught in the chains of matrimony or any other way. So you prove your courage by showing the white feather. Cut and run! You're bound to marry money, for you are not the chap to bear the rubs of poverty. Poverty is always the devil, but it is seven devils to your sort; so be off to-morrow."

"No, to-morrow I must call and—and return Miss Selby a little butterfly that dropped from her hair."

"Not you, faith! Give it to me, my boy. I'll pass it on to the young lady, with——"

"I'll be hanged if you do, and look here, O'Hara, don't be so ready with your advice. I can take care of myself."

"Not in this case, my son. You are all right in most ways—but some old dust of a fate held you by the heel when you were dipped in the font, and somehow that heel affected your heart. Here's a hansom. We have walked far enough."

CHAPTER X.

"A LITTLE CLOUD."

It was with no small degree of trepidation that Claude parted with her cousins, who escorted her to the door of "The Ogre's Castle."

"Now mind, Claude, you do not let yourself be frightened. Don't give in to your father. I haven't the pleasure of knowing him, but I am sure he is the sort of man that is ruined by being given in to."

"Try and make him give a party, Claude!" added Janet. "We will ask the people, for though I am going to college, as they call big schools, I may as well enjoy myself a little all the same."

"You may as well ask for the moon, Janet," said Claude, as the door was opened by Mrs. Tibbets, whose broad face expanded still further at the sight of her young lady.

"Good-bye, dear Kate, good-bye, Janet," cried Claude.

"Au revoir," returned Kate; "for I shall come and see you in a day or two."

"I am glad to see you back, Miss Claude. The master has been pretty miserable, I can tell you. I never opened my mouth to him beyond 'Yes' or 'No,' since you left; and as for Mr. Brandon, I am pretty sure he gave your father a piece of his mind. He has asked for his tea and toast in bed the last two mornings. You go in now, or maybe he'll think we

are conspiring,"—and Tibbets threw open the study doors.

Indignant as she had been and was, Claude could not help being touched at the sight of her father sitting well forward in his old leathern chair, his lean figure cowering over an indifferent fire, his pale face looking hopelessly dull and spiritless. An uncut newspaper lay on the floor beside him, and a couple of unopened letters on the writing-table at his elbow.

He raised his eyes as his daughter entered, and said wearily, "So you have come back."

"Is this *living?*" thought Claude, as she looked pityingly at him.

"Yes," she returned, "and I fear you are not very well."

"I am quite well," returned Mr. Tracey belligerently.

"Your paper is not cut, and the room is quite cold." She stooped to pick up the paper, then, taking off her hat, she went to the coal box, which proved to be empty, and rang for more coals, while her father growled.

"Ha! yes. Tibbets would let me starve, while she is gorging herself over a roaring fire in my kitchen. She had the face to show me the books this morning. They came to an appalling amount. I have ordered her to leave. I will not be brought to the workhouse by a servant."

"My dear father, I should spend a great deal more through ignorance. Pray do not send her away, until I am fitted to fill her place."

Here Tibbets entered with a large shovelful of small coal, looking the picture of dogged opposition.

"Oh! Tibbets, you should not have let the room get so cold," cried Claude, "and could you not bring larger pieces than these?"

"It is just the last crumb of coal in the cellar. I asked leave to order in some more, a week ago, but master kept never minding, and here we are without any."

"I must put a stop to your lavishness," cried her master. "The amount you spent last week was—was disgraceful."

"Of course the week you chose to look at was the worst of the four, but do I ever go beyond the month's allowance? Answer me *that?*"

"You are an extravagant old hag. Go. Leave my house."

"That's all very well, but I'm not going to go. A pretty condition you would be in if I did. Who would slave and save as I do? And what would become of Miss Claude, if I left her to you and the tradespeople? She'd be a cold corpse before this time next year! No! I know my duty—and I'll do it!" rising from her knees before the fire, which she had coaxed and propitiated with delicately administered morsels of fuel, till it grew red and cheerful.

"Now, sir, is Miss Claude to write for coal or not? I've ordered two sacks, on my own account, from the greengrocer's, for I'm not going to starve myself for nobody!"

"There, hold your tongue, woman, the sound of your voice distracts me!"

Mrs. Tibbets very deliberately swept up the hearth, put the ashes into her shovel, then she rose and asked, "Have you had a bite to day, Miss Claude?

There's a shred or two of beef after the beef-tea. It's not just the thing for a dinner-party, but it's better than the pangs of hunger. And there's a crumb of pickles in the bottom of the bottle."

"Do not mind me, Tibbets. I had luncheon early!"

"And a wise woman you were."

"I do hope, Tibbets, you have some beef-tea for my father. He looks very ill."

"Well, I might find a teacupful," and with a stern aspect Mrs. Tibbets departed.

Profound silence ensued, until Claude, cutting the paper, asked, "Shall I read the *Times* to you, father?"

"You may," he returned, not so ungraciously as he spoke at first, sinking back in his chair with a sigh, which Claude fancied expressed a certain amount of contempt. So she began with the city article, and gradually her father brightened up, drawn out of himself by the interest of some remarks on a probable rise in the Bank Rate. Then other financial topics presented themselves, and by the time she had picked out the plums from the mighty journal, and Mr. Tracey had taken his soup, Claude began to forget she had had a stormy scene with her father—had been expelled from her home by him, and had been recalled and forgiven through the man who was the immediate cause of her difficulties. It was all like an unsubstantial dream.

At length Mr. Tracey's eyes closed, and sleep stole over him. Claude rose, and laying down the paper noiselessly, stood looking at the old man. How ghastly ill, how grey and worn he looked, yet he was

not really old. Was he withering away for lack of sunlight, as plants do? The sunlight of affection and sympathy he seemed unable to give or win. No beggar in the street was more cruelly poverty-stricken than he. He had been no father to her, yet her kind heart yearned to the frail worn form, worn and exhausted by a life's labour for "that which satisfieth not." Could she teach him the charm and richness of love before he went hence to the land where all things are forgotten? Lifted above herself by this moment of quiet thought, her father's rage against herself, his unjust treatment for so insufficient a cause, seemed like some pitiable fit of insanity, to be infinitely deplored, rather than hotly resented.

Refreshed by breathing for a moment this higher and purer mental atmosphere, Claude stole away to her room to change her dress, and find her work, in preparation for the long dreary afternoon and evening before her. How vividly the contrast between her and her cousins' bright busy home presented itself! "Would any amount of wealth make them happier? No, certainly not, but diminished means might make them unhappy. A certain degree of ease is essential," mused Claude. "I wonder if Mr. Brandon will come this evening. But he always lets us know when he is coming. I suppose he is afraid of not finding enough to eat. It will be rather strange to sit down with him and my father, knowing that my father wants me to marry him—but I need not trouble myself about this. We understand each other thoroughly. He has been, and he will be, a good friend to me." Then she took up her ordinary occupations as if there had been no break in her life.

It was the third evening after Claude's return home, and Brandon had not appeared, nor given any sign. Mr. Tracey's cough had been very troublesome, and his daughter felt restless and uneasy.

Their dinner over, they were as usual *tête-à-tête* in the study—Mr. Tracey silent, and watching the fire with a thoughtful, far-away look. Claude was at her needlework. She did not like to read while her father was unoccupied, and might like to talk. In her own mind she was calculating how soon the evenings would be long enough to permit of her spending an hour or two at the piano without lighting candles or gas.

"I am surprised he has neither come nor written," said Mr. Tracey suddenly.

"You mean Mr. Brandon?" returned Claude. "I have been expecting him too. I wish he would—you are very dull."

"Hum! I suppose you keep him away."

"No, indeed, I cannot, for we are excellent friends. I like him very much."

"Yet your imbecile womanish obstinacy sets you against him and the plan I had set my heart upon."

"Do not let us speak about it," said Claude in a low distressed voice.

"Yes, I will speak about it," cried Mr. Tracey, with an air of irritation. "I choose a good steady husband for you, who could and would take care of my money, and of you. You reject him, and you will fall a victim to some reckless spendthrift—who will run riot till my hard earnings are melted away, thrown into the gutter. Then he'll make your life a

burden, beat you, maltreat you, and—and serve you right."

"I hope not," said Claude, anxious to avoid the painful discussion.

"Yes, that will be the end of it! Ah! a girl like you, ignorant, as a girl must be, of the right use of things, of realities, of everything worth knowing, is not fit to have the disposal of money. You don't know, you can't know, what my money is to me. It seems something I have created. I am a poor, weak old man, yet I hold a sovereign power when I have money. It is a charge, a responsibility. I am as anxious (and justly) as to who shall reign after me over this great kingdom as any crowned king. What is a king compared to an unencumbered man, without his claims or outside show and so-called duties?"

"Is any rich man unencumbered by duties?" asked Claude, gently.

"There, that question shows how you lean to folly! I tell you that I cannot die happily, I cannot die comfortably, unless I know that my money will pass into safe hands. Not that I have much—God knows—but much or little, yours are not safe hands to leave it in."

"Then why leave it to me?" said Claude, moved to a mixed feeling of pity, anger, contempt.

"That shows you are unworthy of so great a trust. No person fit for—fit to be out of a lunatic asylum is indifferent to money."

"I am *not*, father. Give me enough for my very moderate needs, and do what you like with the rest, but do not leave me quite unprovided for."

"Your moderate needs!" repeated her father,

thoughtfully, while his face relaxed, and a look of deep thought stole over it. "What is your idea of moderation?"

Before Claude could reply, Tibbets came in, bringing with her a newspaper which the postman had just left.

"This is from Brandon," said Tracey, looking at the address, then unfolding it, added, "Ay, the evening paper—some fresh news about that new Austrian scheme. Look for it, Claude, and read it to me."

Claude obeyed, and found the desired information. Mr. Tracey was deeply interested; he took his pencil and the back of a letter—of which a pile saved from his correspondence lay on the table beside him—and scribbled calculations. Then he meditated for what seemed a long time, during which Claude glanced over the paper. Her attention was caught by the heading of a paragraph, "Funeral of Lord Elmslie"—and recalling the delightful impression made on her by Brandon's friend of the same name, she read the details with some interest. "He must have been much older than his wife," she thought. "'Fifty-nine'—why, she scarcely could have been thirty. Poor thing—if he was nice and kind, she will miss him dreadfully, and I don't think she has any children to comfort her." Here her father interrupted her. Rousing himself suddenly, he exclaimed, "Claude, write for me to Hobson, tell him to come up to me to-morrow, between eleven and one o'clock. Write at once, and send it to the post. Then I will take some wine and a biscuit before I go to bed. Why should I allow myself to sink?"

"Why, indeed?" said Claude, kindly. "I am sure

you could help the doctor and yourself by taking proper nourishment. You know all Mr. Brandon has said on the subject. As I am writing, shall I ask him to dinner to-morrow?"

"Ay, do," said Mr. Tracey, absently.

"He may be out of town," continued Claude. "I see an account of Lord Elmslie's funeral, and he may have been at it."

"Lord who? What's that to him?"

"You remember his friend who came to call on me, her name or title was Elmslie."

"Ay, a fine lady, that you went off your head about. Well, write your notes, and send them."

Later Mr. Tracey asked for his candle (he permitted no gas to be kept alight after nine o'clock), and on leaving the room paused at the door, saying, with unwonted civility, "Good-night, Claude."

His daughter looked after him with some surprise. "Have I said anything that touched or softened him to-night?" she asked herself, and passed in mental review their conversation. "No! nothing had passed, which she could recall, likely to have melted the adamantine texture of her father's heart. How weak he seemed. Why did he not gather strength? He was not old, scarcely as old as the man whose obsequies had been celebrated only a day or two ago. Why did he shut himself up from sympathy, from happiness? Why had he this craze for money, why —what folly to think in this way. Why is he himself? Why am I myself?"

Claude ceased this communing with her heart, raked the remains of the fire together, and sat down and read for an hour before going to bed.

By one of those strange but by no means uncommon coincidences, which make us suspect the existence of some law of intermental action, the first post next day brought a note from Brandon, asking permission to dine with Mr. Tracey that evening.

Claude felt quite cheered. Her father had been comparatively amiable all the morning, so he deserved the only pleasure he seemed capable of enjoying.

A little before noon, a very dry, pallid, well-dressed man called upon him, but was speedily dismissed. He was the junior partner in the firm of Hobson Brothers, Mr. Tracey's solicitors. That gentleman, however, declined to speak with any one save the head of the firm, an older man, who had long conducted what business Mr. Tracey trusted out of his own hands, and was perhaps the only other man in the world besides Brandon in whom Mr. Tracey had the slightest confidence.

This contretemps irritated her father; but on the whole Claude considered he had been wonderfully good and almost civil all the morning. He had even said "Thank you," when she brought him his beef-tea, and asked if the coals had been ordered.

Tibbets, without waiting for orders, dusted the drawing-room and lighted a fire, of which Claude gladly availed herself, for her father seemed more himself. He sat writing busily, and did not seem to need her.

Brandon was less punctual than usual. He seemed rather worn and tired when he arrived, looking, in his correct evening dress, almost a painful contrast to Mr. Tracey in his old threadbare coat and straggling disordered grey hair. Since his illness he

attended less to his appearance than formerly. Day by day things became more a trouble to him.

Brandon apologised for being a few minutes behind time, urging in excuse that he had had an unusually busy day. Claude coming in while he spoke, he greeted her with cordiality, as if glad to see her in her place once more.

At dinner her father asked some leading questions respecting a new commercial treaty with Spain, which was then an important topic, and as Brandon had been writing on it in the "Monthly Atlas," he was able to give his host a good deal of information, which saved him the trouble of speaking.

As usual, Claude escaped soon after the dessert was put on—she knew her father preferred a *téte-à-téte* with his guest.

She had established herself in the drawing-room and had almost finished a chapter of Mrs. Burnett's delightful novel "Through one Administration," lent to her by Kate, when Brandon opened the door, and came across to take a seat beside her.

"Your father prefers a doze in his arm-chair to joining you," he said, "and I am glad to have an opportunity of hearing an account of your return to the parental roof."

"There is not much to describe," said Claude, raising her eyes to his with the look of quiet confidence they generally wore of late. "My father received me as if nothing had happened, and my first task was to make peace between him and Tibbets. He reproached me for defeating his plans"—here she smiled, not without some archness, but with complete freedom from the slightest embarrassment

—"and spoke to me of his extraordinary love of the money he has made. Is it not insanity? His must be an exceptional case."

"Well, yes, rather; his character is unusual, and all his strength seems to have concentrated on money-making. It is not an attractive development, but do not let it turn you against your father. You must win him." Brandon spoke earnestly.

"I do not turn from him. He chilled and repelled me at first, now I am amazed at him. He is like a man who has worked in some mine, some dungeon, till he has forgotten that sunshine and blue skies are free, are—are the life of life. I feel the most enormous pity for him—that enables me to be patient and forbearing, and I shall always be patient. He does not frighten me now."

Brandon looked at her thoughtfully for a moment before he replied, "Try to preserve this frame of mind, it is best for yourself."

There was a considerable pause, then Claude broke silence by asking, "Is that charming lady, your friend who called upon me, the wife of the Lord Elmslie whose funeral I read about yesterday?"

"Yes. She is his widow."

"And she has no children?"

"None."

"How lonely she will be. I should like to see her again. Will she live in the country now?"

"Well, no; at all events not in her husband's place—his brother is master there. She will come to town to-morrow or the next day."

"That seems very sad, to be left without home or husband all at once."

"There are circumstances which lighten the gloom of such tragedies," said Brandon, drily. "Lady Elmslie is not fond of the country, and she is quite rich enough to make a home according to her own taste."

"Ah! money again," murmured Claude, taking up her knitting.

"Yes, it is an all-pervading element," returned Brandon laughing. "We cannot afford to quarrel with it."

Claude was silent for a minute, and then asked, "Do you not think my father looking very ill and frail?"

"Certainly not better than he did. I wish we could persuade him to go away for awhile. Can you not manage it?"

"You might. I have no influence whatever. When I came back he seemed only half alive; but when the paper you sent came that evening, he roused up a little. He also talked to me a little more as if I were a rational being than he ever did before. As soon as he had heard all he wished of the paper, he made me write to you and to Mr. Hobson—then he said good-night."

"To Hobson? Did he want to see Hobson?"—in a slightly apprehensive tone.

"He did; and a Mr. Hobson came this morning, but he was the wrong one, and my father would not see him."

Brandon made no reply, but seemed rather thoughtful. Then he asked how she had left her aunt and cousins, adding, "Philip Brandon lunched with me yesterday, previous to his departure, and was talking of Miss Selby, whom he considers the most charming

creature he ever met! Philip is an extremely impressionable fellow, and inclined to utter his opinions in capital letters, but your cousin *is* rather a captivating young lady."

"You would have to know her a long time to know how dear she is, what a companion she is—though she is no angel," said Claude earnestly. "And is Sir Philip gone?"

"Yes—absolutely gone for six months or a year."

"I am sorry. He is very nice and bright. Bright people are a great pleasure to me. I am not naturally hopeful myself."

"Then I fear I am not calculated to cheer and amuse you as I ought. I am rather of the hopeless order myself."

"You ought not to be hopeless, Mr. Brandon. You succeed. Uncle was reading something you had written in a newspaper or a magazine the other day, and he exclaimed what a clever fellow you were."

"Probably I happened to agree with him," said Brandon, laughing. "Still, mere success would not make me an agreeable companion to you, Claude."

"But you are. I like you very much," she returned, with perfect composure. "You are (after my uncle, aunt and cousins) my only friend—and though you think too much of money, I do trust you. I think you are—you can be loyal."

Brandon smiled. He was greatly amused by Claude's adoption of a friendly, sisterly tone. He had perception enough to see that this tone was perfectly real and natural. Here was a young untried girl ready to talk to him with the utmost freedom, to treat him with the frank familiarity that women rarely

if ever evince towards men, unless indeed they are impossible as lovers. Well, he was glad that her friendly regard survived her discovery of his mercenary motives, or rather his avowal of them. What a curious study she was! How earnestly he almost prayed that old Tracey would do nothing rash as regarded his will—for the old man's cough had returned with violence, and he looked terribly cadaverous.

"I am more gratified than I can say by your confidence; believe me I will deserve it. I wish I could do something to make your life brighter, more enjoyable. Later you must come with me to see Lady Elmslie—she will be glad to see you." He stopped abruptly.

"I should be so glad to be of any use to her—but she will not see me for some time, I suppose," said Claude.

"I will let you know. Now will you not give me some music? I have heard none for an age."

For a reply, Claude rose and went to the piano. She was now sufficiently at home with Brandon to like singing to him rather than without him. His quiet enjoyment of her songs gave her courage and confidence in her power. Her voice, though not powerful, was rich and sweet. She was, moreover, well trained, and blessed with a true ear.

She sang on, chiefly from memory; and Brandon lay back in one of the least uneasy chairs, dreaming of the past and of the future in a way very unusual to him, when the companions were startled by the sudden apparition of Mr. Tracey, who came in leaning on his stick, his lank grey eyes looking weird and uncanny, as he made his way slowly to the middle of the room.

"My father!" cried Claude, starting in a kind of fright.

Brandon pushed a chair towards him.

"No," said Mr. Tracey. "I don't want to stay. What a fire! It is enough for three. Brandon, I am surprised you do not remonstrate against—— Ah!" breaking off suddenly—"it is no matter. I'll say good-night, Brandon. I shall be up early to-morrow —I have business, rather important business. Don't mind me."

"Take my arm, Mr. Tracey," said Brandon, looking gravely at him. "You seem tired. Let me help you."

"No, Brandon," said the old man, with a cynical laugh, "not yet. I have life enough left to help myself for a while." He turned and left the room without a word to his daughter.

"It is foolish, I suppose, but I feel dreadfully frightened," exclaimed Claude, clasping her hands tightly together and drawing nearer to Brandon. "I never knew my father to cross the threshold of this room before."

"It was certainly a rather startling entrance," said Brandon. "Could you ask Dr. Brett to look in as if for a friendly visit? Your father looks ill, *very* ill. The house is a depressing abode for you, and I see no way to help you."

"There is none indeed. But if my father continues gentler as he has been yesterday and to-day, I can bear it quite well. I will try to make him see the doctor, and you will come soon again?"

"I will, certainly I will. Yet it may be three or four days. Will you write to me? Write to me to-morrow."

"Yes, with pleasure." They exchanged good-nights, and with a curious dislike to be left alone, Claude followed him to the hall, exchanged a few last words while he put his coat on, and Tibbets stood ready to lock up when he had gone. She then called her faithful servant to put out the lights.

"Don't you mind, my dear. The master ain't no worse than he was three or four weeks ago. The only thing that frightens me is that he is more reasonable like. Please God he'll be rampageous again next week."

Tibbets was heartily anxious that her master's life should be prolonged till everything was "made safe," which, in her mind, meant her dear young lady inheriting every scrap of property belonging to her father. The amount of his wealth, according to Tibbets' creed, was enormous.

So Claude went away to bed, and dreamed strange dreams till morning.

The right Mr. Hobson came soon after breakfast, and was closeted with Mr. Tracey till late in the afternoon; during which time Claude sat contentedly though rather chillily in the drawing-room—where she wrote a note to Brandon reporting that her father appeared quite himself, and even stronger than the night before—a report she felt fully justified in sending, when she joined him at luncheon. His brow was free from the frown which generally clouded it, his voice was less harsh, and, though silent as usual, when he did speak, it was with a little more civility than Claude was accustomed to from him. He even praised the poached eggs served on toast which formed his midday meal, and asked if it was a shop

egg or new laid. Tibbets boldly replied it was a best egg, secured at the unprecedentedly low figure of three half-pence. Mr. Tracey gave a sort of groan, but did not utter any articulate syllables of disapprobation.

The cloth had been but a short time cleared away, when Tibbets returned to say that Miss Selby wanted to see Miss Claude.

"May I ask her to come and see you?" asked Claude.

"Hum—no. Yes. Just before she goes, she may come in. Don't bring her now!" raising his voice in accents of distress.

"No, certainly not—if you do not wish it," said Claude, as she hurried away, her eyes beaming at the idea of so delightful a visitor.

Kate Selby stood in the centre of the drawing-room, gazing round her with curious critical eyes.

"Well, Claude dear, here I am, you see." The two girls embraced—then stood a little apart, and laughed merrily. Kate wore a large black velvet hat, and a close-fitting long black jacket with a dark fur collar, and from out of this soft darkness her brilliant eyes and rich colour looked strikingly handsome.

"How nice and good of you to come. Sit down, and tell me all about every one—and take off your jacket."

"Yes, I will, for it is quite warm and spring-like. And so this is your own, own drawing-room, Claude?"

"Nothing in the house is much my own own, but this is the drawing-room."

"Ah!" Kate glanced around, "it is woefully ugly —if you do not mind my saying so."

"Not in the least. I see it myself."

"With our late experience, I should say you might make it quite pretty for twenty-five pounds. Wouldn't Mr. Tracey pay as much as that to give you a nice room?"

"Five-and-twenty pounds, Kate! He would not give five-and-twenty pence."

"What in the world is the use of money except to spend?" said Kate philosophically.

"I'm sure I don't know," returned Claude. "Never mind the room. Just tell me how you all are, and what you have been doing."

"We are all quite well, and busy as bees. For what do you think—Tom has been appointed to the Kimberley Branch of the Bank! and will have a much better salary, and some chance of a little sport. He is delighted—so is every one—though I think mother will feel parting with him. We shall all miss him—though he *is* a little tiresome sometimes. He is to start in about a fortnight, and we are working our fingers to the bone for him."

"This is very good news, Kate, I suppose."

"First-rate. Mummy already sees him chief manager, a millionaire—and I don't know what. You must come and stay with us for a day or two before he goes—for you know Tom the least of us all."

"I dare not hope for such joy. I fear I must not ask for leave so soon again."

"I'll ask for you," said Kate stoutly. "We have been rather gay lately, Claude. Mummy and my father dined at the Boltons' last Saturday. Mummy had such a pretty new cap—we had great work to make her buy it. She looked *so* nice. Dad was

prouder of her than ever, poor dear; though she did scold him for insisting on having a cab. It was a dry evening, and she thought they might have walked. It is not far, you know. Then we went to a big afternoon tea at the Jephsons', and heard Kelly sing, oh! so sweetly. And they made me sing. I was awfully nervous, but Captain Bolton said he liked my song better than Kelly's. Of course he knows nothing about it. Then, on Sunday, we, Dad and I, lunched at that Mrs. Saville St. George's. You remember the lady who used to wear her hair powdered and wrote psychological romances and poetry. She always lived at the Kretchmer Pension."

"Yes, I think I do."

"It was so amusing. She gives large luncheon parties in a very small dining-room. There were some delightful people. Barry Langton, the man who plays in 'The Road to Ruin' so charmingly. You have not seen him,"—and so she ran on for some minutes, ending with, "London is a dear, delightful place."

Then there was a short pause, and Claude said: "I will ask my father if he will see you."

"Surely he can have no objection," cried Kate.

"He is very weak and unwell, Kate. He seemed to get on better at first, but he has never been the same since his illness."

"Indeed, I am very sorry"—absently. Another break, then Kate resumed with some little effort, "Sir Philip is gone, quite gone for ever so long. He called to bid us good-bye, and brought me a little butterfly pin I wore in my hair at the Boltons'. I missed it when I came home. I am so sorry he is gone. None of the men I dance with (we were

at another dance, you know) are half so amusing, or such good style, or—but there—he is gone, and I daresay I shall never see him again—so there is no use in worrying," concluded Kate.

"Yes, Mr. Brandon told me he had left England."

"Does Mr. Brandon come and dine as usual?"

"Yes."

"Well, that is a mercy. It must keep you from quite turning to stone."

Claude laughed. "I daresay it does—but he is not nearly so bright as his cousin."

"Oh, no—he is not to be compared with him."

"I am not so sure," began Claude, and broke off. "I will tell my father," she said, and left the room. Returning in a few minutes, she said "Come," and Kate followed her to the ogre's special den.

"This is my cousin Kate," said Claude, rather nervously, as her young visitor stood silent before the solemn frail-looking old man, whose sunk cheeks and weird grey locks impressed her with a slight feeling of awe, "and your niece," she added, with a sweet deprecating smile which might have disarmed a real original ogre.

"My niece, eh?" said Mr. Tracey, darting a keen glance at her from his deep sunken eyes. "I am not sure I acknowledge these relationships." His voice was not so ungracious as his words, and he took the hand she held out, dropping it immediately.

Kate, though generally daring enough, was somewhat abashed by this death-in-life-looking, forbidding old man, but she rallied gallantly. "I am going to ask you a favour—you must not refuse me."

"What is it?" sternly.

"Let Claude come and stay with us from Saturday to Monday next. My brother is going to the Cape, and will not see her again for years."

"I suppose it will not be fatal if he does not see her!"

"Ah, no, of course not—but we all want to see her. Will you not allow her to come?"

"Claude is of use to me," he returned slowly. "I want her to do many things: she is learning my ways. I do not want her to go."

"But only for two days," began Kate.

"If my father wants me, I will stay with him. I can go and lunch with you, Kate, one day, and bid Tom good-bye."

"Can nothing be done without eating and drinking?" asked Tracey with a sneer. "Go and bid this tender-hearted young gentleman good-bye some afternoon when I can take a sleep."

"Yes, that will do very well," cried Claude.

"Selfish, disobliging, ill-bred old ogre," thought Kate. "Then I must say good-bye," she said aloud.

"Yes," he replied, "you had better not be out too late."

Thus dismissed, Kate beat a rapid retreat.

"Tell my aunt I am coming on," said Claude, as she accompanied her cousin to the door. "My father never acknowledged that I was of use to him before."

"Are you to be congratulated on such a triumph?" returned Kate. "Why, you will become a regular state prisoner if you give in to such disgraceful tyranny. Mind you come soon on Sunday. Good-bye, you poor dear victim. I wish I could see Mr. Brandon," and, like the mighty Syrian General, she "turned and—went away in a rage."

CHAPTER XI.

"THE BEGINNING OF THE END."

BEATRICE, Lady Elmslie, had obtained her heart's desire.

She was free, wealthy, a peeress, while still young and handsome. Her husband's brother, and successor, was not unnaturally much enraged to find how large a sum had been subtracted from the sum total of the late lord's fortune, to enrich a woman he had never liked and had always suspected. Still Lord Elmslie left a goodly amount of property to support the title, and the new lord's own portion had been handsome for a younger son.

At first, he talked wildly of disputing the will and routing the widow—but a few days' reflection, and some moderate counsel from the family solicitor, restored him to common sense.

After a few uneasy days, Lady Elmslie felt that her position was impregnable. The evening after her husband's funeral she left the home where she had reigned supreme, leaving to a duly authorised agent the task of removing the various articles of furniture and art, bequeathed by the deceased nobleman to his "beloved wife," and took up her abode in a well known West End hotel, which was soon the focus of a stream of cards, notes, inquiries, circulars, and all the business applications to which the announcement of such a death as Lord Elmslie's gives rise.

Among the piles of cards which Lady Elmslie

examined every day, she found only one inscribed "Ralph Brandon." He had answered a brief note she had addressed to him two or three days after the funeral, in very kind and friendly terms; but, although she meant that note to be an invitation to call, he had not evidently read between the lines, and she hesitated to ask him deliberately. She hoped, from day to day, he would send up a request to be admitted.

But a week passed, and Brandon showed no sign. Then her convictions chapped round, and she decided that he was waiting for an invitation. Forthwith she took pen and paper and wrote:

"DEAR RALPH,—Are you not coming to see me? Yours truly,

"BEATRICE ELMSLIE."

"I wonder what he has done with his miser," she said to herself, "and the miser's daughter. She must be rather an unusual young woman if, believing herself to be at best only fairly well dowered, and a mere nobody, she refuses Ralph Brandon. She must be both ignorant and inexperienced in society if she does not perceive that he has all the ingredients which command success. It is rather too overvaulting ambition for an unformed child like Claude Tracey (what a queer name) to expect a man of Brandon's type to fall in love with *her!* Really there is nothing so audacious as the effrontery of ignorance. It is as well that scheme was put an end to at once. No amount of money could make that shy silent chit a fit wife for *him.* No—he needs the companionship

of a woman of the world, who can understand his ambition and his objects, can aid them by her connections, by her knowledge of life, as well as by her money, if she has that too." And Lady Elmslie walked across the room to glance at her own reflection in a long glass between the windows. "How hideous and barbarous this widow's dress is! But I must keep on terms with conventionality, as I have always done—I must keep the links which bind all potent respectabilities to me unbroken. I may want them yet—if——"

A waiter, entering to present a card, interrupted her meditations. She turned quickly, and took it with some eagerness. Her countenance changed a little as she said, "I will see him," and she returned to the sofa, in a corner of which she had been lounging, with a note-book or journal in her hand, before she rose to look in the glass.

"Mr. Saunders," announced the waiter. A spruce, dapper, light-coloured man, exceedingly smart and brushed-up, entered and made a low bow, which Lady Elmslie returned by a smile and a gracious but stately bend of her head.

"Good-morning, Mr. Saunders. I did not expect you to-day."

"I ventured to call on your ladyship, as I am glad to say that we have succeeded in convincing Lord Elmslie that the statuette of Cupid with his bow *is* the one bequeathed to you, and now I think we can complete the packing and removal of all your property. I think I understand aright that it is your wish that all these articles of furniture, ornaments, etc., etc., should be stored in one of the chief depositories?"

"Yes. My plans are, of course, rather unsettled. I may go on the Continent for some time." A conversation ensued respecting the reinvestment of sundry sums of money; when the usual formalities were accomplished, and the provisions of the late lord's will carried out.

The smart solicitor was deeply impressed by the gentle gravity of his distinguished client: it conveyed the idea of profound, if undemonstrative, regret; also he was struck by the quiet persistent desire on the fair widow's part to make the most of every penny she possessed.

"Have you brought me a copy of the will?" she asked, when they had discussed these topics.

"I regret it was not complete when I left the office, but you shall have it in the course of to-morrow."

"Then I must ask you to mark the passages which affect me. I cannot find my way through these terrible legal papers, and I *must* understand my position thoroughly. When I have studied it, I will send for you to correct any misapprehensions I may have found; and, I don't think I need trouble you any longer." She bent her head, and her man of business felt the audience was over.

He rose, bowed, and departed, but as he was about to turn the handle of the door, it was opened by the waiter, again the bearer of a card. At the end of the passage a gentleman greeted him.

"Good-morning, Mr. Saunders."

With an air of deference, Mr. Saunders replied, "Good-day, Mr. Brandon."

"Her ladyship will see you, sir," said the waiter, returning. Brandon, with a bow, passed on.

Lady Elmslie advanced to meet him, and held out her hand with winning grace.

"Why have you deserted me, Ralph?"

"*Deserted* you? My dear Lady Elmslie, what an accusation! I resisted my inclination to come and see you, because I knew how busy you must be, and probably surrounded by your legal advisers."

"Legal, perhaps—but what friendly adviser have I save yourself? You know I never made a friend of any man—and women don't count. There are a hundred and one things in which you can help me."

"If I can help you in fifty, I shall esteem myself happy."

"Sit down then, Ralph, and ring the bell. I want some tea. Everything has turned out as I hoped. I am lord of myself, and I do not think I have a 'heritage of woe.'"

"You do not suggest sorrow certainly, only decorous regret."

"I was dreadfully afraid Colonel Grantley (I mean the present Viscount) might have given me trouble, but he has the sense to see that my position is not to be assailed—so I suppose I may rest—at last."

"I daresay it has been an anxious time for you of late."

"Of late!" she repeated. "It has been an anxious time for ten long years. No one has had a glimpse of my real life. Do you know that not for half an hour for those long ten years have I been off guard. Elmslie was the type of a jovial, hard-riding, hard-living country squire. In truth he was full of jealousy

and suspicion. He was fond of me—and the consciousness that I did *not* love him, in the sense of being in love, never left him. To assume caressing ways would have been too degrading, so I had to adopt the infinitely more difficult rôle of frank liking —and, while he expected me to attract people to his house, to add to his importance, while the least appearance of particular attention from an individual (an individual man, of course) would have made him murderous, it was ages before he trusted me at all. Only quite lately he grew less keen about everything, and believed I deserved some reward for my long service. How selfish and mean and unmanly he was! How well he understood his own interests! Ah, I have earned independence hardly."

Brandon listened to this outbreak with a curious mixture of sympathy and distaste. Lady Elmslie had brought it all on herself by her preference for luxury and distinction in lieu of comparative poverty and possible obscurity. Had she had more faith and patience—well, she might have been expending her endurance on himself. On the whole, Brandon thought matters best as they were.

"It has been a severe ordeal, no doubt," he said aloud, "and you have shown admirable discretion."

"I don't know that I deserve much credit for my discretion. Prudence is easy, when life has ceased to have any temptations. *Now*, I may begin to live, I may dare to breathe freely, to lift up the heavy irons with which I held down my heart, to cultivate whom I will, to *love* whom I will. Oh! Ralph, it may seem horrible to you, this joy at the freedom death has conferred—but life *has* been hard, terribly hard to me."

"Who could have imagined it?" said Ralph Brandon, looking at her with curiosity and some compassion. "You always had the air of floating on the topmost billows of success."

"Of course I had. Am *I* the kind of woman to court defeat by bemoaning my misfortunes and grovelling under the contemptuous consolation of pity?" There was indescribable pride and scorn in her tones.

"You are a woman made to rule," said Ralph, looking with reluctant admiration at her.

"To rule. Ah! a woman wants more than *that.*" Lady Elmslie spoke as if to herself.

"Have you formed any plans yet?" asked Brandon, with interest.

"None. I shall not leave London until matters are settled. Of course the executors, being old friends of the Elmslie people, will defer handing over my husband's bequest to me as long as they legally can. When it is absolutely mine, I think of going to Italy for a few months,—but I suppose I shall settle in London, finally. By the way, I am told Lady Mary Everard wants to let her house for a few months, till the end of June. I think I shall take it, as I must stay near the lawyers and people. It is less costly than a hotel, and I never intend to squander money."

"I am glad to hear you say so. Where is the house?"

"Oh, it is quite a tiny mansion, but pretty and comfortable. In Lindore Crescent, quite near the Park."

"It is a good plan."

There was a pause. Brandon's thoughts were evidently far away. Lady Elmslie watched him with cautious eyes. She broke silence first.

"How is the affair Tracey going on?"

"Naturally and easily enough for me. My little colleague has to bear the brunt of things, I am sorry to say."

"Has she relaxed from her stern resolve?"

"She has not, nor shall I ever tempt her to retract her decision. She is proving an uncommon character. I am rather interested in her."

Lady Elmslie lifted her eyes and gave him a searching look.

"It *is* interesting to study character," she said, "but how has Miss Tracey to bear the brunt of things?"

"She is with her father every day, and all day long. He is rather on his good behaviour with me when I do go to see him—but he thinks his daughter ought to be his slave. When I returned home from my brief visit to Allerton House, I found that her father had turned her out of doors—absolutely without a sou, because she rejected my offer!"

"Why did you tell him?"

"*I* tell him!" cried Brandon indignantly. "Do you think I should have been such a dastard as to tell him? I warned Miss Tracey not to let him know, if she could possibly avoid it. However, my amiable old friend asked Claude point-blank; and she has some awkward ideas about truth, so he found out that she had sent me about my business. Then he expelled her from her home."

"Poor child! What did she do?"

"She had a refuge at hand with her aunt—where I found her. Of course I soon brought old Tracey to his senses, and she is re-established in her home. Indeed her father seems more rational and amiable than he was. I think Claude dreams of a radical

reform—but I fancy he is too old a sinner to mend."

"And you are more the friend of the house than ever? It is a curious position. I shall be very much surprised if the girl does not end by falling dreadfully in love with you."

Brandon laughed. "That would be awkward, for I am afraid I should not respond. No, Lady Elmslie, I do not imagine Claude Tracey would ever be *dreadfully* in love with any one."

"Is she a cold-blooded creature, then?"

"I cannot tell you—I don't know. She is very young in some ways—younger than her years."

"I should like to study this remarkable character," said Lady Elmslie thoughtfully. "In a week or two I shall be less occupied, and my widowhood less recent. Then I will ask Miss Tracey to come and see me."

"You will gratify her immensely. She quite lost her heart to you, and has often asked me about you since."

"And what character did you give me, Ralph? A heartless worldling?"

"No, Lady Elmslie. I don't think you heartless."

"You ought not," she said, low, but emphatically. Then, after a short pause, she added, "You said I might be of use to her, to this protégée of yours, when you first spoke of her to me. Can I still not be of use?"

"No doubt. But I asked your aid when I intended to marry her, and my motives were selfish enough. I wanted her broken to the particular harness I wished her to wear. Now I know her better, and doubt if she would care to be fitted for a life of ambition and social distinction."

"In short, unfitted to share *yours*."

"Perhaps so. Unfitted for mine as I once designed it. It so happens that she has had the power to change the outlook for me."

"Ralph," interrupted Lady Elmslie, "Miss Tracey is not the only well-endowed woman of your acquaintance—and her wealth, her *possible* wealth, seems her only qualification to be your wife. There are plenty of rich women who have been trained in our school. Do not give up the search, because your 'find' is not quite of the right pattern."

"Whether I ever find 'the right pattern' or not, I am not at all inclined to continue the search. I fancy Nature intended me for an old bachelor—and Nature is a lady against whom it is not wise to rebel. She does not bear contradiction."

"How little you know yourself, Ralph."

"Perhaps you are right, Lady Elmslie. Now, I have troubled you enough about my affairs. I will bid you good-morning."

"Do not stay away so long again."

"I shall be most happy to call—but pray remember that I am a hard worker, and cannot often refresh myself by such pleasant moments as these."

"If you choose, you can." She held out her hand with a caressing smile. "I never believe half what men say about hard work."

"You may believe *me*, Lady Elmslie. Good-bye, for the present."

Lady Elmslie stood quite still for an instant after he had left her, her great eyes gazing into vacancy, a vacancy peopled to her with fast thronging shadowy pictures of what the future might bring. "It is a

curious complication," she murmured to herself, "very curious. I do not think he is quite aware of all the possibilities I foresee, or does he choose *not* to see? That girl—I must cultivate that girl!"

* * * * *

How is it that monotony lends such wings to time? Is it that the narrow gauge of mental power needs events whereby to measure its silent flight, as peasants need their fingers to aid their arithmetic?

It was the end of March; and though the days had gone slowly, in looking back it seemed to Claude as if but yesterday, that miserable time when her father turned her out, and her heart had been so painfully hardened against him. Since her return, he had been wonderfully mild, and submitted to be taken care of with some degree of patience. But day after day passed beside the grimly silent old man, not liking to read when he was unemployed, not liking to sit at the piano and leave him alone—remarking with increased uneasiness that he asked her less and less to read to him, or to write for him, was a depressing mode of spending time. Her aunt and cousins were too busy, preparing Tom for his departure, to come and see her save for a few brief visits, and a short solitary walk to keep herself from complete stagnation was all the change she had.

Brandon, too, came but twice during this long spell of dulness. He was much occupied, and Mr. Tracey no longer expressed any eager desire to hear from or see him.

March was going out like a lamb; and Brandon, after a morning of steady work, looking from the window of his rooms in J—— Street, noting the bright

sun, the blue sky, and the spring-like aspect of the women's dresses passing by, began half unconsciously to make pictures of woodlands, still leafless, but carpeted with primroses and violets.

"I must see Claude Tracey soon," he said to himself. "What a life that poor child leads! it is enough to break her spirit. Might I take her for a day in the country? On Saturday I could manage it—and be 'Arry to her 'Arriet.' I suppose it would hardly be the correct thing—yet I should enjoy it, too. I should enjoy seeing the colour creep up in her pale cheek, and something of a sparkle in her quiet eyes. I really feel quite a fatherly interest in her. She is singularly alone, and old Tracey is failing. I trust he will play his daughter no shabby trick in his will. It is more than a fortnight since I was at Lichfield Terrace. I don't think Tracey ever left me to myself so long before. I really must——"

Here a staid woman-servant came in and presented a note to Brandon. He opened it and read:

"DEAR MR. BRANDON,

"My father fainted last night. I at once sent for Dr. ——. He says it is only the result of weakness, and orders him to keep in bed and take a great deal of nourishment. Yet I am frightened. Can you, without inconvenience, come here to day? It would be a great kindness—it would cheer both my father and me.—Yours truly,

"CLAUDE TRACEY."

Brandon went hastily across to his writing-table, and took up a list of engagements. "Hum! only

two indispensable interviews. The rest can be managed. The old man is going. I must try and find out if all is right for Claude. I feel curiously responsible for her fortunes. I wish I had never made the mistake of asking her to marry me. Will she ever get over the impression of my money seeking? Will she ever quite believe in my disinterestedness? Yes. She is true enough to recognise truth."

With these thoughts floating through his brain, he sat down and wrote rapidly several notes. Then he went out and telegraphed to Claude that he would be with her before three o'clock.

When Brandon reached Lichfield Terrace, the door was opened to him by a middle-aged woman, whom he had not seen before. In reply to his inquiries, she said Mr. Tracey was not worse, and ushered him into the study, where the fire was nearly out, and the general aspect of the room deserted and dreary.

Mr. Tracey had never been a cheerful object, and Claude's quiet pose, with her knitting in her hand, was more suggestive of endurance than enjoyment. Yet how woefully desolate their absence made the place seem.

While he thought thus, the door opened and Claude entered.

"How good——" she exclaimed, holding her hand out, and suddenly pausing, for her voice failed her. She was pale, and her eyes had a strained, half-frightened look. Brandon took her hand in both his own.

"I am infinitely sorry I have not been here for so long a time. I might have noticed some change in your father which escaped you, and secured prevention, which is, you know, better than cure. How

has Mr. Tracey passed the night?" And he drew the only comfortable chair forward, leaning against the mantelshelf while he spoke.

"He had rather a good night, Tibbets says. Tibbets would sit up all night in his room. Occasionally he talked indistinctly, but she thought he was asleep all the time."

"What does the doctor say?"

"That there is no immediate danger, but he is terribly weak, and requires great care. I earnestly hope my father may be spared, for the last month he has been so much gentler and more reasonable. I really think he begins to like me. I should be so glad to have a kindly recollection of him. It is a real misfortune not to be able to love one's own father."

"Have you a very loving nature?" asked Brandon, studying her face with curious interest.

"I do not know. How can I tell? I love my aunt and uncle and cousins. I am quite happy with them, but I do not know that I ever cared much for any one else except the French governess at my first school."

"A short list," said Brandon, smiling. "It is very trying for you to be here alone when your father is seriously ill. Had you better not ask Mrs. Selby to stay a few days with you?"

Claude shook her head. "My aunt could ill be spared from home—and it would annoy my father if she were to come here. Besides, I am not alone. Tibbets is more than a servant, and I am not such a coward as I used to be."

"You are no coward," said Brandon. "You have

the best courage—courage to surmount your own fears. Would Mr. Tracey like to see me?"

"I am sure he would. I will ask him." She left the room, and Brandon mused on the unusual specimen of feminine character offered to his observation in his new friend. She was curiously true, and perfectly natural. "This absolute sincerity," he thought, "will always prevent her being a charming woman. She has no shade of coquetry in her nature, and without it no woman can be attractive. A false woman is, of course, a horrible thing, when we find her out—but absolute sincerity is really about the most repellent quality a woman can possess, as far as men are concerned. I doubt if it is even good for themselves. Such natures, if they love, love too deeply. They give much more than they get. This girl, this woman—for, with all her simplicity, she is most womanly—may suffer cruelly yet, nor can anyone help her.'

"My father would like to see you, Mr. Brandon," said Claude, coming noiselessly into the room.

Brandon followed her upstairs. He found Mr. Tracey, propped up with pillows, in a large bedroom, the furniture of which was old and faded, the carpet patched, the bed curtains washed out, but everything was clean and well cared for. The unusual quiet and content of his old friend's face struck Brandon as an alarming symptom. Mr. Tracey held out his hand feebly, but did not speak at first.

"I hope you are feeling all right, this morning," said Brandon cheerfully.

"Yes, quite comfortable. It is nice, lying quietly here."

"Well, Mr. Tracey, I fancy you had a good deal of quiet always in your study."

"Ay, but I was not quiet in myself. Now I am."

After a few more desultory remarks, Brandon tried to approach the subject of Tracey's provision for his daughter.

"Can I do anything for you in the way of business?" he asked. "I should he most happy to make myself useful."

"No, I don't think there is. My business is nearly all over. I have settled everything to my mind—*quite* to my mind."

"I am glad to hear it, Mr. Tracey. That is a long step towards recovery."

"Oh, yes. I'll recover, I'll recover. I'll get down stairs to-morrow, and then you must come and dine."

"You have a very good nurse—in your daughter."

"Good, ay—she has more sense than most women. She does not chatter, she does not want to buy rubbish, but she does not, ah! she does not know the value of money."

"Time will teach her," said Brandon, laughing, and feeling most thankful that the old man seemed to have let go the idea of marrying off his daughter himself—for he expected this would have formed the chief topic during the interview.

"Never," said Mr. Tracey in a low voice, and then raising it, he repeated emphatically "*Never.*" A silence ensued. Brandon, feeling at a loss for a topic, and also considerably relieved in consequence of attributing the old man's unusual calmness to his having made an equitable disposition of his property —and also abandoned all idea of his matrimonial

scheme—thought he might go down to Claude for a little more study of character.

"I am afraid you must be very tired, Mr. Tracey. I will leave you now, and call again to-morrow, when I hope to find you much better and stronger."

"Stronger? Ah, I don't think I shall be much stronger." Here Tibbets entered with a cup of arrow-root.

"More to eat!" growled the invalid, with something of his old impatient roughness. "If you go on like this, I shall be in the workhouse by the time I am strong enough to be moved there."

"You just sup it up, sir. The doctor says you're not to fast more than two hours, and it's over that since you had your beef-tea."

Claude was sitting quite still, and, strange to say, quite unemployed, when Brandon returned.

"Mr. Tracey seems rather better than I expected," he said. "And I notice the change for the better you mentioned. He is more restful and content. Something has relieved his mind. I feel sure it is your soothing influence."

Claude shook her head. "I cannot quite believe that—but I am pleased you agree with me, for he must be happier. I often think with wonder of the desolate, empty life with which he has been satisfied. How has he existed?"

"And how could you be his daughter?" exclaimed Brandon involuntarily.

"Yes—is it not curious?" she returned—"for I am not easily satisfied. I am greedy for the real good things of life. Oh, *how* delightful the world might be."

"I did not think this was the impression the world made on you."

"Very likely. But you see, I am only beginning to talk to you."

"I trust you will continue to give me glimpses of your inner self," he returned, with the rare sweet smile which gave a sudden charm to his dark, almost sombre face. "They interest me immensely."

"Yes, I think I could tell you a great many things," said Claude, looking at him thoughtfully, her small head slightly to one side, with an air of profound consideration.

Brandon laughed. "Suppose you put on your hat," he said, "and come out with me. A short walk in the fresh air would revive you, and we can continue the discussion."

"I should like to go very, very much, but I expect Dr.—— soon, and I should not like to be away when he comes. Some other day—if it did not trouble you—if you had time."

"I shall make time," said Brandon. "Then if you will not come with me——"

"Here's Mrs. Selby, Miss Claude," said Tibbets, putting in her head.

"Oh! how glad I am!" cried Claude, running out to meet her aunt. Brandon exchanged a few words with Mrs. Selby, and set forth, glad not to leave Claude alone.

At the corner of the terrace, where it debouched into the main road, Brandon met the doctor driving in the direction of his patient's abode. He stopped his carriage, and Brandon asked his real opinion of Mr. Tracey.

"Well, there isn't really much the matter—but a little extra strain would suffice for a man so radically weak. You see, Mr. Tracey seems to be a man who has fed mentally on himself, a one-idea'd man, incapable of reciprocity, and such characters are apt to die of inanition. You can't divert them. If Mr. Tracey is well taken care of, he may live some years longer—but the heart is very weak. . . . In short, he might be carried off at any moment. However, we must hope for the best. Miss Tracey is greatly cut up about him. She is remarkably plucky, in spite of her fragile looks."

"Then you feel sure there is no immediate danger?"

"None. I have known men affected like Mr. Tracey live for years."

"Thank you, doctor. I will not detain you."

And Brandon walked on with an unusual sense of expectancy. If Mr. Tracey died, what—what was to become of Claude? And what would the old man do with his money?

CHAPTER XII.

"A GREAT MISTAKE."

"DEAR MISS TRACEY,

"Take pity on my loneliness, and give me the pleasure of your company at luncheon to-morrow.

"Yours very truly,

"B. ELMSLIE."

This note reached Claude one evening, some days after Mr. Tracey had again rallied and resumed his ordinary course of life.

To Claude, the temptation to accept at once was strong. She took the note to her father. If he showed any reluctance to be left to the care of Tibbets, she would refuse.

"What is it?" he asked querulously, as she showed him the note.

"It is an invitation from Lady Elmslie. I will read it to you."

When she finished, she waited for some observation, but her father kept silence.

"Do you wish me to refuse?" she asked at length.

"No. Do as you like. There is no need to stay with me—I am not helpless. My eyes get tired, but you can read me the papers before my luncheon. Perhaps Brandon may call. He doesn't come often now. That's *your* doing."

This was the first time Mr. Tracey had alluded to

his frustrated scheme. Claude felt dreadfully distressed.

"I don't think I have influenced Mr. Brandon's coming or going in the least. He did not care for me. He only wanted to oblige you—he is better pleased not to marry me."

"Perhaps so, perhaps so," returned the old man indifferently. "That's nothing to me. Do as you like—do as you like. *I* have done with you." He laughed—low and unpleasantly—then added, "Hobson may call to-morrow afternoon. I don't know, but he may."

Claude felt oddly repelled by her father's manner. Latterly his comparative gentleness, his increasing weakness, had drawn her to him. Now she felt no difficulty about accepting Lady Elmslie's invitation, and wrote to her to that effect.

"What shall I do, Tibbets?" asked Claude, as that faithful functionary was removing her breakfast tray the next morning. "I am nearly at the end of my quarter, and I have only two shillings. How I should like to go in a cab to Lady Elmslie's; yet I do not like to leave myself penniless, and I cannot bear to ask my father for anything. It is too humiliating to be cross-questioned and refused."

"Ay, it ain't right by no means. Don't you go next or nigh him. I've a couple of sovereigns laid by. I'll give them to you. Oh, you can pay me when you get your money. So don't you go tramping through the dirty streets to a fine house such as this lady will have, but just drive clean and tidy in a cab. I'll brush the velvet on your hat. It's a trifle dusty. Then you will look all right. Have you a

new pair of gloves? I've well-nigh forgot about nice things, but I *do* remember the gentry like new gloves."

"Thank you, Tibbets—you are very good to me. I have a pair of nearly new gloves."

"It's all too bad," said Tibbets, half to herself, as she swept up the hearth. "When you ought to be driving in your own carriage. What's the good of the master's money to *him*? But there, he is so weak and quiet, I can't get angry with him."

"Don't you think he is very much changed, Tibbets?"

"Ay, *that* he is. But he'll be wanting me to help him dress;" and, seizing the tray, Tibbets disappeared.

If the house Lady Elmslie had taken was small and unpretentious, it was dainty and exquisitely tasteful in its arrangement and decorations. Claude was ushered into her hostess's presence by an elderly man of military bearing, with large moustaches, and a broad honest-looking face. This was her ladyship's special attendant, a German, who acted as her courier when she travelled, and regulated her household now she was no longer hampered with a large establishment.

"It is so good of you to come to me on such short notice," said Lady Elmslie, rising from her writing-table in the smaller of two drawing-rooms. "I have been so dreadfully moped, it is quite charming to see a bright young face," and she took Claude's hand cordially.

"It is a great pleasure to me." And Claude blushed slightly, gratified by the kindly greeting.

"I believe you," returned Lady Elmslie, smiling, "or I should not be so glad to see you. Take off your hat. Luncheon will be ready directly. How is Mr. Tracey?"

"He is not ill exactly, but terribly weak, and not like himself."

"Fading away," was Lady Elmslie's mental comment. "I wonder what she will do with herself and her money? Give both to Ralph?"

"Very melancholy and trying for you," she said aloud. "And as I have been surfeited with melancholy too, let us not say another word about disagreeables, but enjoy breathing space, and only speak on pleasant topics."

"She cannot be very sorry for her husband," thought Claude, while she said, "It is a great relief to look on the bright side of life."

"And have you been well yourself? You look rather pale and wearied."

"Yes: it is rather curious, but I feel weary from morning to night."

"I don't wonder at it. A week of such a life would—— Ah, there is the bell."

The dining-room was a bower of prettiness, opening at one side into a conservatory from which the perfume of the flowers came to pervade the atmosphere deliciously.

"How charming!" exclaimed Claude, looking round with delight.

"Yes, it is a cosy little place; but I have only taken it for six months, then I shall have to choose a more permanent abode—and I rather dread it."

"I think furnishing a home of one's own must be

a very pleasant occupation. My aunt, Mrs. Selby, has been furnishing her house, and I felt immensely interested whenever I could watch her progress."

"Then you must marry some man who isn't the owner of a family mansion, filled with the musty fusty furniture of his forefathers."

"Oh, no. I should much prefer the task of choosing for myself;" and Claude helped herself to something very brown and tempting offered her by the attendant, of the nature of which she was profoundly ignorant, when the door opened and the majestic German in stentorian accents announced "Mr. Brandon."

Claude, a little startled, looked up—her eyes brightening.

"You are late, Ralph," said Lady Elmslie, holding out a slender white hand sparkling with brilliant rings. "Miss Tracey and I were too hungry to wait."

"I should have wished the earth to open and swallow me, had you done so," said Brandon very calmly. "This is an unexpected pleasure, Claude. I am glad to find you here."

"They are on tolerably familiar terms," thought their hostess. After some polite inquiries for Mr. Tracey, Brandon applied himself seriously to his luncheon. Observing the choice dishes, the perfection of the service, the care shown to all details, Claude almost blushed when she thought of the meagre dinners and the homeliness of all accessories in her father's house. How could Brandon like to dine there? If indeed he had put up good-naturedly with the poverty of an old friend, she would have admired

him; but if his only attraction was the hope of pleasing a rich old man and perhaps securing some of his money through marriage with his daughter, why, her feeling was one of irritation against him. But this was folly. He had confessed his errors, received absolution, and was turning over a new leaf. Meantime Lady Elmslie and Brandon were talking of certain society movements which were Greek to Claude; and further, of politics and political changes, which were profound mysteries to their listener, whose admiration for Lady Elmslie increased every moment. Why, she seemed to know everything.—Art, Music, Politics, besides hosts of people whose little foibles and characteristics seemed all familiar to her. What a companion, and how wonderfully good of Brandon to be satisfied with her own second-rate music and comparatively childish talk, when he might enjoy such brilliant conversation every day! Still, he did not seem so very much amused after all, and every now and then addressed some question or observation to Claude, as if to get her to join in. Suddenly, apropos of music, he said:

"You must ask Miss Tracey to sing for you, Lady Elmslie. She is a songstress of no mean order, I assure you."

"Indeed? This is a new charm. Though no musician myself I greatly enjoy other people's music. You shall sing to us when we go upstairs."

"If it would give you any pleasure," said Claude, softly, shyly. "I wish, Mr. Brandon, you would ask my father to let me have some more lessons. I need a great deal more study."

"I will do what I can, but—we must not worry him just now."

"Oh, no. Of course I can wait."

"Do you think Mr. Tracey would allow his daughter to come with me to Paris for a month or two, Ralph?" asked Lady Elmslie. "It is a curious fact (you know I am not given to take fancies), but I fancy we should get on together remarkably well. It would be such a comfort to have a companionable companion."

The colour rose in Claude's pale cheeks.

"How charming it would be. How good of you to think of me," she exclaimed.

"Yes—it would do Claude a world of good, in every way," said Brandon, in a tone of elder-brotherly, almost fatherly interest. "But to get Mr. Tracey's permission would indeed be a tremendous task. Yet I do not shrink from attempting it; but it would be well to wait," and his eyes sought Lady Elmslie's with a peculiar glance.

"We will leave it all to you," she said. "Come, if you will take nothing more, we will go to the drawing-room."

Arrived there, she opened the piano, and begged Claude to sing.

"Let me play a little first to get my nerves in order," said Claude, smiling.

"Oh, pray, do whatever you like."

As usual, Claude grew absorbed in her music, and, as the chords swelled louder, Lady Elmslie whispered to Brandon, "What is the matter with the father?"

"Only the approach of the last enemy."

"Ah, indeed. Then she will be free?"

Brandon bent his head.

"She is really a nice little thing. Wouldn't she do, Ralph?"

Brandon looked very steadily in her eyes with a warning glance, and uttered a low .but distinct "Impossible."

"You are great friends?"

"Exactly."

"Is the old man *very* rich?"

"I believe so."

"You ought to make sure."

"It is really nothing to me."

"Suppose Mr. Tracey leaves *you* a large legacy?"

"It would be an agreeable surprise."

"It is not easy to get at your real convictions, Ralph."

"On this subject I *have* none." And Brandon laughed. His laugh was rare, but very pleasant. It is curious how much character there is in a laugh—which is a guarantee of good faith—and a dry contemptuous cackle, suggesting the effervescence of lemon juice and soda water, which is generally excited by some fellow-creature's discomfiture; and there is a clear, quiet, kindly laugh, which assures one it is prompted only by healthy fun or the salt of true humour. Brandon generally looked older than his years. His laugh restored him to youth.

"Do sing, Miss Tracey," said Lady Elmslie, seeing that Brandon was disinclined to continue their whispered colloquy.

Claude complied, choosing a very simple "Schlummerlied." Lady Elmslie listened with great attention,

surprised at the touching expression the young singer threw into the music.

"You have a delightful voice, Miss Tracey. Ralph, you have not told me half enough about it. It is most melodious—and, above all, you sing in tune, which is rare. You ought to go on studying. Of course you want more teaching."

"When do you think of going abroad, Lady Elmslie?" asked Brandon.

"I am quite uncertain. I want to stay for some time, if I go. It is such a wonderful change to have only my own wishes, my own will to think about."

Claude looked up quickly, to see if these words wore expression of regret for a lonely position, or rejoicing at new-found liberty, but remained undecided.

"Your cousin Philip was here yesterday," resumed Lady Elmslie, "and seemed very sorry for himself. He starts to-morrow for the ends of the earth. I suspect he has lost a good deal in racing, yet he is, I imagine, a good judge of a horse."

"That has nothing to do with winning or losing," said Brandon.

"I suppose not. He says he is going to let his place—to live on the rent, to screw like a miser for two or three years. One cannot help liking Sir Philip. But he has been woefully thoughtless."

"Yes," returned Brandon, rising to take leave. "He is brimful of resolutions."

"Can we not set you down anywhere?" asked Lady Elmslie. "I am going to take Miss Tracey for a drive, or anywhere she would care to go."

"Thank you. If you will put me down in Piccadilly."

"Very well. We shall be ready in five minutes."

Having left Brandon in Piccadilly, Lady Elmslie drove on to Gainsborough Gardens.

Aunt Selby, however, was not at home. "She was busy," said Major Selby, who came to the carriage door to speak to his niece, and be presented to the handsome widow, "about Tom's preparations. Tom was to start on Thursday." Then he thanked Lady Elmslie for her kindness to Claude, and Lady Elmslie replied most graciously, expressing a hope that later she should make the acquaintance of Mrs. Selby and her daughters—which greatly pleased the good-natured major.

"Try and dine with us one day, Claude," he said. "Just to see the last of Tom."

Then Lady Elmslie deposited her young friend at her own home.

"I have gained almost all I wanted," she mused as she drove back. "It will be hard for me if I do not obliterate the 'almost.' I must be Claude Tracey's guide, philosopher, friend, idol, dictator. I will marry her soon. Why not to Philip Brandon? He is not a bad fellow. If that tiresome old father would only die, we should know what we are about. As it is, we are groping in the dark. That insignificant girl cannot and shall not stand in my way."

After this episode, the dullness of Lichfield Terrace seemed duller than before. The indifference and apathy of Mr. Tracey steadily increased—though broken occasionally by fits of furious irritation, chiefly against Tibbets and the doctor, whenever the latter dared to call. Sometimes, too, his old miserliness about trifles flickered up fiercely. Towards Claude,

he grew more and more gentle. A caress was something quite impossible to his strange indurated nature —but his daughter's heart melted more and more at the sight of his growing weakness, his pitiable isolation. She longed to draw forth something of confiding tenderness from the old man, whom she felt, though she did not acknowledge the feeling, was passing away.

Brandon seldom came to dinner. Sometimes he called late in the afternoon, sometimes quite in the evening ; but he did not stay long, nor did Mr. Tracey seem to notice his absence, nor heed his presence.

March had gone out in lamb-like guise. The weather was wet and oppressive. At the end of a long day spent in almost complete silence, while she plied her needle beside her father's chair, Claude was informed that young Mr. Selby was in the drawing-room.

"Don't bring him in here," said Mr. Tracey. "I shall try and sleep. I am very tired, and the light is nice and soft." The day was, in fact, fast closing in.

"Yes, do try and sleep. Your eyes have been open so long," returned Claude soothingly, and she went away to exchange farewells with her cousin. She found him full of boyish exultation at the prospect of change and travel, though sorry to part from his people. While they talked together too earnestly to heed outer noises, a second ring at the front door bell summoned Tibbets, who opened it to admit Brandon.

"Mr. Tracey is not at dinner ?" he asked.

"No, sir. We have no late dinner, nowadays. My master is in the study."

Tibbets' manners had been formed during the remote ages when the existence of masters and mistresses was acknowledged. "And Miss Claude is just speaking to young Mr. Selby in the drawing-room."

"Pray do not disturb her. I will pay my visit to Mr. Tracey."

Brandon was struck by the languor and indifference of his old friend's manner. "I am afraid you are not feeling so well, Mr. Tracey?" he said, after starting various subjects, none of which the old man seemed inclined to pursue.

"I am quite comfortable," he returned. "I have arranged everything. My mind is at rest. I have all I want. She is a good, sensible girl—I mean Claude. She has some idea about money, and its value. Oh, yes! she is wiser than I thought."

"I am very glad you are learning to appreciate her."

"Just so, Brandon. I should like to have seen you two married—but I suppose it cannot be, now."

"Well, hardly," returned Brandon, smiling. "But I shall always be her friend, and only too glad to do her any service."

"That's right. Now, suppose you excuse me, Brandon. If you don't mind, I'll go away to bed. I take my supper upstairs now; it is more comfortable, and less expensive—yes—certainly less expensive."

"Pray do not stand on any ceremony with me, my dear sir," said Brandon.

"No, I will not. Ring the bell, will you? I want Tibbets to see me safe upstairs. My limbs are not as strong as they were. Good-bye, for the present.

Claude will be here presently," and, leaning on his stick, Mr. Tracey shuffled away.

"Poor Claude!" thought Brandon, as he threw himself into the easy-chair just vacated, which was turned partially towards the fire and sideways towards the door. "What a life for her! And, quiet as she is, she has the power of enjoyment. I will stay and have a little talk with her, when the Selby cub is gone." He lay back in deep reflection, partly about his own plans, partly about the singular way in which he had become interested and concerned in the fate and fortunes of Claude Tracey—his reveries on the subject ending, as such reveries always do, in a sense of angry regret that he should have made so false a step as to ask her to be his wife, when he could not honestly say he was in love with her.

Profoundly occupied with his thoughts, he sat in the semi-darkness, and scarcely heard the sound of a closing door. Nor was he conscious of a light footfall which noiselessly approached him, until suddenly startled by the touch of a hand on his shoulder, while a pair of soft fresh lips were tenderly pressed, not to his mouth, but on the cheek close to it, and Claude's voice murmured, as she drew away, "Try and love me a little, my father."

"Your father——" began Brandon, standing up, and feeling absurdly confused.

"Mr. Brandon," exclaimed Claude, darting to the table to strike a match and rapidly light the candles. "I beg your pardon. I had no idea you were here. I left my father exactly where you were, and—and—I beg your pardon."

She was confused, but by no means overwhelmed.

Brandon's first thought was to save her all possible annoyance, to make light of the embarrassing mistake.

"I will try to forgive you such a natural mistake," he said, laughing pleasantly. "I can only hope when I am a few years older, I may have a kind daughter to care for me and caress me."

Brandon's quiet tone put Claude at her ease.

"Why did not Tibbets tell me you were here?" she asked a little impatiently.

"Because you were engaged with your cousin—then she went upstairs with your father."

"My poor father, he is always wanting to go to bed, *now.*"

They conversed for some minutes upon this subject, but Brandon felt they did not get back to their usual tone, and he thought it was wiser to take leave.

"I shall be freer next week," he said, "and have the pleasure of seeing you. Perhaps I may meet you at Lady Elmslie's. I know she hopes you will call. Meantime, will you send me a report of your father—or a summons, in case he wishes to see me?"

"Yes, I will," returned Claude, raising her eyes. As they met his, she coloured slightly, and laughed a frank, amused laugh.

"Good-bye, my dutiful daughter," said Brandon good-humouredly.

"A curious adventure," he said to himself, as he drove towards his club. "Such composure, such self-possession, on the part of a young lady who has just kissed you is not quite flattering to one's *amour propre.* Were our relationship less peculiarly divested

of the possibilities of love-making, I might not object to a repetition of the mistake. As it is, this has been probably my only chance of knowing what sweet lips my little *protégée* has."

CHAPTER XIII.

"THE LAST ENEMY."

MRS. SELBY was silent and preoccupied for two or three weeks after her son's departure, but otherwise she made no moan and showed no depression. She was an eminently practical woman, and knew what she wanted much too distinctly to fret about Tom's absence, when that absence secured him a step in an upward direction. Nevertheless, she hung up his hat beside his father's in the hall, and placed his discarded walking-stick in the umbrella stand, as a sort of perpetual remembrance. Kate had wept heartily, as she did everything, on parting with her brother, and pictured him undergoing all kinds of privations, though her father suggested that the existence of the bank to which he was accredited was some guarantee for the comforts of civilisation. Janet presented a solemn but unbroken front, and at once began a letter—somewhat in the style of a journal—in order to keep the absent Tom well posted up in home news.

Both girls had recovered their wonted tone, and were ready to welcome Claude, even more warmly than ever, one bright but showery afternoon she had ventured to leave her father and walk over to Gainsborough Gardens.

"It is so nice to see you," cried Kate, whom she

found busy at some needlework in the "muddle-room," as the breakfast parlour downstairs was disrespectfully termed.

"Mother and Janet have gone to buy some ferns and plants. The conservatory is getting on splendidly. They will be here soon, as they promised to be back to tea."

"No news yet of Tom?"

"Oh, no. We can't hear for a fortnight or more. Why, it is five o'clock—we must get tea ready. We will have it in the dining-room with the large comfortable cups, and some brown bread and buttered toast, as it is not Mummy's 'at home' day. You know, we have Wednesdays now. Doesn't that sound fine? Last Wednesday we had six people, all ladies, of course. And we are going to two teas and a dance next week—to say nothing of a conversazione the week after. What do you think of that?" Kate was folding up her work, and regulating her work-box while she spoke.

"It is very fine," said Claude, smiling. "You are quite in a giddy whirl."

"My poor father has rebelled against the teas. He says he can stand a dance, and even pull through a conversazione, but he is generally the only man at the teas—unless indeed it is a musical affair. He is frightened at all the dowagers at the first, and somehow riled by the long-haired unshaven Poles and Russians and queer out-of-the-way professors. Dad has his prejudices, you know. The dowagers make a great fuss with him—so he gets worried. There, that's mother's ring: we will go up to her."

They found Mrs. Selby, Janet, and the parlour-maid

busy taking in some plants which had been carried home by a small boy, who had to be rewarded and dismissed before the ladies sat down to tea.

"Now, dear child, tell us all about yourself," said Mrs. Selby, as she handed Claude her cup.

"I have very little to tell, auntie. One day is exactly the same as another, and I haven't had a new book or a bit of new music for ages. Yes—I forgot —Lady Elmslie took me out to drive last week, and gave me a new song—but I don't like it. It is commonplace and vulgar. She says it is 'popular.'"

"And your father—how is he?"

"Rather better, I think. A little stronger—and so quiet, and comparatively gentle, I begin quite to like him. Don't laugh!"—for Kate smiled at this avowal.

"And Mr. Brandon?" continued Mrs. Selby.

"We do not see him much. He does not come nearly so often, I am sorry to say. It was a little break, his visits."

"Yes, no doubt," returned Mrs. Selby. She was a sound-minded, right-thinking woman, who never suggested that a girl's expression of pleasure in the society of any man implied more than an avowal of preference for a woman; and, being of the same moral and mental tone themselves, her girls, including Claude, were free from that unhealthy expectation of finding men and lovers one and indivisible, which used to be more prevalent than it is.

"Then, is your father less eager for Mr. Brandon's society than he used to be?" resumed Mrs. Selby, when she had finished a slice of toast.

"Yes, he is more indifferent to everything."

"A bad sign, my dear."

Here their attention was attracted by the sound of feet ascending the hall doorsteps and of the latch-key in the lock. Janet darted to the window.

"Why, it is father and Captain O'Hara," she cried.

Almost before she ceased to speak, the door opened and Major Selby entered, exclaiming, "I've brought you a favoured guest—so make a fresh brew."

"Not for me. Don't trouble the ladies for an unworthy member like myself," cried O'Hara.

"Ah, Captain O'Hara, don't fish," said Kate. "You shall both have fresh tea," and she went off in search of another tea-pot and newly boiling water.

"I just fell in with my friend here at the Boltons'. We both arrived at the same moment to drop our pasteboards, so, as he looked famished, I brought him in to share the cup which, etc."

"You have been away a long time, have you not, Captain O'Hara?" said Mrs. Selby, while the girls busied themselves supplying both men with tea and toast and generally petting them.

"I have, Mrs. Selby. You see, that fellow Phil Brandon is mighty attractive. He coaxed me up the mountains there near Pau, to shoot wolves. They're the devil's own beasts; and there was a queer little chap at the table d'hôte, would face me down through thick and thin that dogs were nothing but civilised wolves. Begad! I'm inclined to think civilisation is more likely to turn those fine honest fellows—the bow-wows—into wolves, rather than the other way."

"So do I," said the Major, approvingly.

"There is no doubt the wolf is the ancestor of the dog," said Janet decidedly. "Naturalists——"

"Are always unnatural fellows, faith," interrupted O'Hara, whose scientific knowledge was of the scantiest, and who had a true Celtic dislike to facts which contradicted his favourite theories.

"Ah, Captain O'Hara," said Mrs. Selby, "you and I, who went through the mill before all the 'ologies were the fashion, have much pleasanter notions than these highly-educated young people."

"Oh, as to me, I know I am in heathen darkness. But you, Mrs. Selby, could have gone through the grinding-young mill. Begad! Miss Selby and yourself are just like an elder and younger sister."

"Now, Captain O'Hara, on your oath, *which* is the elder sister?" cried Kate.

"Why, yourself, of course," said Major Selby, laughing. "Come, let O'Hara drink his tea in peace, and give him another cup."

"Will Sir Philip go on hunting these dreadful creatures now he is alone?" asked Claude, who took a good deal of interest in her cousin's admirer.

"Do you fancy Philip Brandon wants *me* to take care of him? By George, Miss Tracey, you never were more mistaken. He is more likely to take care of me. Phil's a dead shot, and has the pluck of two. He knows his ground into the bargain. He used to go up the Pyrenees with an old fellow, the Marquis de something, a great chum of his father's. Phil speaks the patois of the country, too."

Claude saw that Kate was listening with avidity.

"I did not think Sir Philip Brandon was a linguist," said Claude.

"Anyway, he has the gift of the gab—but he's a fine fellow, only a little careless—about the cash, I

mean. So it is better for him to be shooting wolves over there than be devoured by wolves here."

"A fine fellow!" ejaculated Major Selby. "It will be a lucky girl that has a fortune to invest in such a first-rate article."

O'Hara buried his face in his tea-cup. In truth he felt on delicate ground. He was warmly attached to Philip Brandon, and he wanted to show Kate that the young man's poverty, not his will, consented to seek ignominous safety in a mercenary marriage; while, with the curious side out-look for the possibilities of business, which the most ardent Irishman can generally cast around, even though he fail to follow its suggestions, he did not wish to parade his friend's wish to repair his fortunes through Hymen's help before Claude, who might, he thought, be a splendid catch for Sir Philip, one of these days, and moreover enable him to triumph over Brandon, upon whom, for some occult reason, O'Hara looked as a rival and an enemy to his own favourite.

"A husband who wants to repair his own fortunes with his wife's is seldom a satisfactory investment," said Mrs. Selby, replacing the cosy over the tea-pot.

"I suppose a girl *might* be loved for herself as well as for her money," said Claude thoughtfully. "And men want money terribly."

"I am afraid the two motives would never mix harmoniously," exclaimed Kate. "And then, I don't know how it is, but nice people, really nice people, never seem to have any money."

"What *very* nice people we must be," said Janet gravely, as she handed the brown bread and butter to O'Hara.

"Begad! you're a young Daniel come to judgment. I would not wonder if you could turn the tables on any modern Shylock, if you come across one, Miss Selby," cried O'Hara, with enthusiasm.

"There is a great deal in Portia that reminds me of Kate," said Claude, looking pensively at her cousin.

"Faith, she reminds *me* of her in more ways than one," returned O'Hara, with a complimentary grin.

"Well, the fortune-hunters will have a grand prize in the market next year," said the Major. "O'Hara and I met Lady Elmslie driving in Regent Street yesterday. She is a lovely woman, and no mistake —and old Elmslie has left her every farthing he could alienate from his heir. There's a *parti* for your friend Sir Philip!"

"Ay, but——" began O'Hara, and then checked himself, resuming—"Yes, that would fit in right well. She is a lucky woman, and a charming one. No nonsense about *her*. Corr and I (we have a stable between us, you know) have a filly (a dark brown beauty she is) we are going to enter for some of the autumn events. I'm thinking of calling her 'Beatrice,' after her ladyship, just for luck."

"It is getting late," said Claude. "I must return home."

"You might stay a little bit longer," cried Janet. "We will walk home with you."

"Even so, I should be late for dinner—and that annoys my father. I had better go now, auntie."

"Yes, I think you had. Your uncle will escort you, if he is not tired."

"Tired—not I," cried the Major. "Come along,

Kate. Go, put on your hat. You wouldn't let your father walk home in the dark, alone, would you?"

"No, certainly not," said Kate, rising to comply with his suggestion.

"Well, I must be off, too," said O'Hara. "I must say good-bye, Mrs. Selby; I am going up to Yorkshire to-morrow, for a week's hunting with old Brocklebank, and I daresay he'll persuade me to stay longer. He is a regular old Nimrod. He has some of the best horses in the country, and that is saying a good deal. So it will be some time before I see you again."

When Kate and Claude returned to the dining-room, O'Hara had disappeared.

The evening had cleared, and was fresh and fair. Claude enjoyed walking briskly between her uncle and Kate.

"How do you think your aunt is looking?" asked the former.

"Better than the last time I saw her," returned Claude. "She is almost herself again."

"Ay—it cut her up a good deal, parting with the boy—but it is best for him. By Jove, life is a bit hard on mothers. They spend their lives on both boys and girls, suffering all they suffer, from the first tooth to the last worry about love or money, and, as soon as the boys are able to take care of themselves, they are generally whisked off to earn their living, at the ends of the earth, and come back almost strangers; while as soon as the girls become pleasant companions, some young fellow spirits them off to another home, and, even if it is almost next door, the girl is lost to her own people. Ah, it is the way of the world."

"And a bad way too," cried Kate. "I shall never give into it. I shall be as fond as ever of my own people. No husband will ever love me as well as you and mother do."

"Don't be too sure," exclaimed her father. "I know your mother is ten times more necessary to me now than she was the first year we were married."

"That is habit," said Kate thoughtfully. Then the talk turned on Tom and his prospects.

It was growing late when they approached Lichfield Terrace, and the sense of cheerfulness, of renovation, which a visit to her aunt's home always created in Claude, began to die away, as she neared the gloomy precincts of her home.

"I am afraid I stayed too long with you," she said. "It must be quite seven o'clock. But I find it hard to come away."

"Don't mind," said Kate, "your father does not seem to want any one."

"Then he has that capital old woman, Tibbets, who is a host in herself," remarked Major Selby.

"I don't think Tibbets would like to be called old," began Claude, smiling, and then paused abruptly. They had turned the corner of Lichfield Terrace, and could see Mr. Tracey's house. The door was open, and Tibbets stood on the threshold, speaking to the doctor, who was apparently just going away.

"My father must be ill," exclaimed Claude. "The doctor has not been to see him for weeks," and she hastened forward.

"What is the matter, doctor?" she asked eagerly, as soon as she reached the door.

"Oh, Miss Tracey," he returned, raising his hat,

"your father was taken seriously, very seriously ill. Heart trouble—as I feared. I will come in with you."

"Is there immediate danger?" she continued, noticing that Tibbets looked very white.

"I will tell you."

"Can I go to him first?"

"No, certainly not. Hear me first. This gentleman?"

"My uncle, Major Selby, and my cousin, Miss Selby," explained Claude hastily.

"Ah, indeed? This is fortunate."

They all followed Claude into the drawing-room, the door of which Tibbets opened in a decided way.

Here the doctor paused, and then proceeded in a hesitating manner.

"I was sent for about an hour ago, and found Mr. Tracey had been seized with a fainting fit. The housekeeper was startled by a violent ringing of his bell, and ran to the study; there she found Mr. Tracey lying insensible on the floor. He had evidently felt ill or in pain, and managed to ring the bell before life had fled."

"'*Life had fled,*'" echoed Claude, instinctively clutching her uncle's arm. "Do you mean——"

"It is my painful task to tell you that your father has passed away. I knew that there was serious mischief in the heart—but also that he might have lived a few years. . . I will not intrude any longer."

"Sit down, my dear—sit down, Claude," said Major Selby kindly. "You are trembling, you can't stand. Go, Kate, get her a glass of water. It's better so, my child. Just one pang—perhaps scarcely that—and all was over, instead of suffering long drawn out. And *you* have been a good, attentive daughter."

"But to die alone, not a creature near him! To die while his only child was laughing and talking, at a distance. Oh, it seems too dreadful!" murmured Claude. She was profoundly agitated. "I wish, I *wish*, I had not left him."

"And I am glad you were spared the shock of seeing him fall," said the doctor. Then, as Kate hurried in with the glass of water, he added. "Suppose, Major Selby, we leave Miss Tracey to your daughter's kind care and discuss one or two matters before I go."

"By all means. I will come back to you, my dears."

"Claude, dear," exclaimed Kate, putting her arms round her cousin when they were alone, "lean your head against me—there. Let the tears come—don't check them."

"I do not, Katie—but I don't seem to have any. I feel a great horror, and oh! I am so grieved to think he was alone at that awful moment. But I have no tears. My poor father! I think he was beginning to be fond of me."

"Indeed, indeed he was! What a comfort it must be to you to think you were melting his heart, for he was very, very hard."

"Yes—that is what makes his death so awfully sad. If he had lived, and loved, and enjoyed, I could have shed tears over him. Ah, had he been spared a few years longer, I might have taught him what happiness meant; but he has gone down into the dark valley without ever having seen any sunshine."

Here Tibbets came in. Claude rose, and taking the good woman's hand, kissed her cheek, at which caress Tibbet's tears flowed freely.

"Well, you did your best, my dear young lady.

You have nothing to reproach yourself with. By and by you must come and look at him. He makes a beautiful corpse, quite beautiful!" And the three talked together, softly, with many a pause, hushed by the awful "presence" in the house.

"You will come back with us, Claude dear," said Kate. "You must not stay here."

"No, Kate. While my father's remains are here, I will not leave him. It would seem undutiful." While the three conversed, the doctor and Major Selby spoke of the necessary arrangements.

"My certificate of death will suffice to prevent any trouble about an inquest," said Dr. Brett. "I suppose you will give orders about the funeral?"

"Well, no. I don't fancy I shall have any right to interfere. I shall telegraph to Mr. Tracey's solicitor, and his only intimate friend, Mr. Brandon. They will give all necessary directions."

"And the poor young daughter? She must not be left alone."

"Certainly not. She must come home to my house—or Mrs. Selby, her aunt, will come to her."

After a few more words, Dr. Brett left; and Major Selby joined the young orphan and Kate.

Claude decidedly refused her uncle's invitation to return with him to his house.

"Then, my dear, I will go and bring your aunt. She is the best person to take care of you—you will be all right with her at your back."

"Thank you—it will be a great comfort."

"Kate shall stay with you, dear, till we return."

CHAPTER XIV.

"MATTERS OF BUSINESS."

IT was all over, and Claude established in Gainsborough Gardens. The late event, and the sudden change in her own position, began already to lose their strangeness.

The day but one after the funeral was soft and rainy. Major Selby had gone, by Brandon's particular request, to meet him at Hobson's office, and hear Mr. Tracey's will read. The Major was gratified by this piece of politeness and set forth with an air of some importance.

Mrs. Selby did not attempt to conceal her anxiety as to what the will might disclose. "He was such a curious, crabbed creature," she said to Kate, when they happened to be alone together, "and so vexed that Claude was a girl, that I cannot help fearing he may have left his fortune to some charity, and poor Claude may be but ill provided for."

"Not a charity, Mummy, I am quite sure. To a society for the punishment of poverty, perhaps, if one existed. Oh, he never could be such a wretch. However, we shall soon know."

"It seems a pretty long time. I don't think Claude has a doubt."

"Not one," echoed Kate. "She was talking this morning of taking a house by the sea-side, and our all going together there. Oh, she expects to have everything."

"I trust she will not be disappointed. Mind, Kate,

when your father comes back, you must leave him with Claude and me."

"Of course, but you will tell me all about everything after."

"Why, Claude will do that herself."

"I think I will go and meet Janet coming back from school—I mean college—and so keep out of the way. It makes me quite nervous waiting in the house."

"Do, my dear," said Mrs. Selby.

This anxiety was quite unshared by Claude herself. She was only a little curious on two points. Had her father remembered the faithful services of Tibbets? Had he bequeathed any token of regard to Brandon? This last Claude hoped for most eagerly. Tibbets she could provide for herself, but Brandon would accept nothing from her.

The hours went by heavily. Major Selby was evidently detained. "I suppose they are discussing plans and investments and all sorts of things," thought Mrs. Selby, as she sewed a long seam rapidly, her hands working as diligently as her brain. "I suppose that poor child"—glancing at Claude, who was curled up in a corner of the sofa with a book—"will be, or is, an heiress. What a pity that Tom is not a little older—but there, I am too terribly worldly and self-seeking. They would never like each other, and all the wealth in all the world's mines would not make up for an unhappy marriage. Still, if—— Oh, dear"—interrupting herself—"there's your uncle. I thought I heard his latch-key." This was a false alarm, and Mrs. Selby had again sunk into an abyss of conjectures, when a sharp ring preluded the

entrance of the Major, who had forgotten his latch-key in the excitement of starting.

"Claude, dear, shut the door. Now do tell us everything."

The Major drew a chair to the table, sat down as if he could stand no longer, and letting his clenched hand fall heavily on the table, said emphatically:

"It is the most infamously unjust will any man ever made. It is just three sides of a sheet of paper, and disposes of something over a hundred thousand pounds. A paltry six thousand is left to Claude, and all the rest to—who do you think?—Brandon! Not a legacy, not a penny to that faithful creature Tibbets! Not a poor £20 to buy you a mourning ring" (to his wife), "after all your goodness to his child—not an infernal rap to mortal, only Brandon."

"Good Heavens! How shameful!" ejaculated Mrs. Selby. Claude, who was standing at the opposite side of the table from her uncle, grew pale.

"It is strange," she murmured. "Was my father gentler and kinder, because he was pleased at having bestowed everything on Ralph Brandon?"

"God knows," said the Major, with a look of disgust.

"Six thousand pounds is a good deal, is it not?" asked Claude.

"It is a decent provision, and, as it is well invested, it will give you £250 a year. But what is that compared to what you *ought* to have?"

Claude kept silence. She stood very still with downcast eyes.

"My father loved his money better than his child," she said, in a low tone. "I thought he would leave

Mr. Brandon something, but not all. I think Mr. Brandon will be vexed."

"It is a curious thing to be vexed about," said Mrs. Selby.

"Well, do you know, I believe Claude is right," observed Major Selby. "I really think Brandon was vexed. He said it was most unjust. He is coming to speak to you about it to-morrow. By the way, he is left your guardian as well as executor: in short everything must pass through his hands."

"My guardian?" echoed Claude.

"Yes, you cannot marry any one without his consent, until you attain your majority, and that is nearly two years off."

"Only a year and a half. Oh, I don't care about that, Mr. Brandon will be kind and friendly, but I do not like being treated as—as less than—a stranger. I know my father thought me incapable of taking care of money, but—" She paused abruptly, as if reluctant to betray emotion.

"Never mind, my dear child," cried her uncle. "Two hundred and fifty a year will keep the wolf from the door, and it will be your own fault if the whole doesn't come to you. I fancy Brandon has made up his mind to have none of it. Why, no end of ill-natured things will be said about his cutting you out."

"I do not think Mr. Brandon would mind that. But is my guardian not coming to see me?" and she smiled faintly.

"Yes. He was greatly hurried, and deeply engaged, or he would have come back with me to-day. I think you will be sure to see him to-morrow."

Claude bent her head, and after a pause asked, "And the money which cannot be kept from me, will it be enough to keep me independently, enough to live upon?"

"Yes, Claude, quite enough," cried Mrs. Selby, her eyes looking moist.

"And if it is not, my dear," added the major, "remember you always have a daughter's place in my house. Don't be down-hearted, Claude; we will make good terms with Brandon. He is inclined to do the right thing—he is a gentleman—so keep up your heart, my love."

"Yes, I shall," with a slight sob, "but I wish my father had thought me worthy of inheriting his money, that——"

"Don't let yourself sink into sentimentality, Claude," interrupted Mrs. Selby. "You have enough to keep your head above water all your days. I wish Kate and Janet were as sure of the same amount, though that does not excuse your father for cutting you off in such a shameful manner."

"It is infamous!" ejaculated Major Selby. "But it can't be helped now, so try to put the thing out of your head. It is not worth fretting about—you have youth and health, and enough, at the worst, so your best plan is to try and enjoy yourself as much as you can."

"Oh, don't suppose I shall fret myself because I am not wealthy, but I should like to have the disposal of some of my father's riches. There are things I want to do, people I should like to help, much that two hundred a year will not compass, and books—oh, I want so many books."

"Well, my dear child, just keep quiet till you see Brandon—he will have something to propose."

"I should think he would," cried Mrs. Selby. "He surely will not dream of robbing Claude."

"By George, it's no question of robbing. The property is his now, and what he resigns will be generosity, not justice."

"Exactly, uncle," cried Claude. "And that is what stings me, to accept as a gift what ought to be my own."

"As long as matters end well, I don't care," said Mrs. Selby, whose notions were rather worldly.

The return of Kate and Janet gave a turn to the conversation, though the whole story had to be told over again.

Deep was the sympathy and indignation expressed by those young ladies, and dark were the suspicions hinted at against Brandon.

"Why, Claude can't possibly keep horses on such a miserable pittance," exclaimed Kate. "*That* was one of our most delightful schemes. We were all to ride, and Dad was to have a lovely horse."

"It is just as well to have all this nonsense put out of your heads," said her mother tartly. "You forget —much or little—the money is Claude's, and I don't suppose her guardian will allow her to waste it on other people."

"I should not be surprised if Mr. Brandon were a cross, tyrannical, disagreeable guardian."

"Why, Kate! You said only the other day you thought him both good and nice," exclaimed Claude warmly.

"I suppose he had been a little civil to me. I am too impressionable—in fact, rather a goose."

"Well, wait and see how he turns out."

"Come, let us have some tea," said Mrs. Selby, with a sigh. "I confess I am woefully disappointed."

Claude said no more, but her fair wide brow contracted with a look of pain and annoyance.

To Brandon, the contents of Mr. Tracey's will were less a surprise than a source of extreme annoyance and mortification. To Claude and to her relatives he would seem an interloper, a despoiler of the orphan. Possibly Claude might do him justice, might understand him, had he not played the part of a mercenary suitor, and thus given her the right to think he would do anything for money. "What a benighted idiot, I was, not to see through her seeming coldness and simplicity!" he thought. "Her nature is really complicated, she has a high idea of marriage, and no doubt has not the faintest notion how the generality of men, even very good fellows, regard that holy state. It is an infernal shame to let girls walk about the world blindfold, or worse than blindfold, in blinkers, which only permit a restricted view of things. I never was so humiliated in my life as by Claude Tracey, but I shall have 'to eat more dirt' to-morrow, when I see her. And I thought her—common-place, almost plain, when I first saw her, a sort of amiable nonentity who would marry any one her father chose. I wish I hadn't to see her. Do I wish it? No, I really want to see her. I hope she will not lose her temper and be unjust. I like her quaint, frank composure. If—if a spark of the

divine fire touched her heart, she might sometimes look lovely. Poor child! what a time she had with that old father of hers—and yet she hoped to put life and humanity into his petrified nature. Chance was just when the kiss she intended for him fell to my share. How cool she was about it, too. But all that kind of folly is over for me. I might—I might enjoy teaching her another view of the subject. I wonder if——" The entrance of a visitor interrupted his reverie, and Ralph Brandon was once more the practical, hard-headed man of the world.

When Claude was informed the next day that Mr. Brandon was in the drawing-room, she felt a curious mixture of eagerness and reluctance to see him. Eagerness, to prove, as she fancied the first glance would, that he was really distressed of being preferred before herself; reluctance, lest he might show unmistakable indications of ignoble satisfaction.

Brandon was standing by the fireplace in the bright pretty drawing-room, which was beautified with primroses in beds of moss, and sweet with hyacinths. He looked very dark and grave, but came forward with outstretched hand as Claude, looking slighter and fairer than ever in her long straight mourning dress, approached him. Their eyes met, each searching the other, before they exchanged a word.

Claude was the first to smile, and the smile was sweet and frank, for, with the precipitancy of youth, she allowed herself to be reassured by the answer of his eyes to hers.

"I almost dreaded to meet you, Claude," he exclaimed, with a hurried utterance very unusual from his ordinary cold composure. "This extraordinary

will of your father's, coming as the culmination of your previous experience, must suggest the gravest doubts of my sincerity, the sincerity of my regard."

"I do not doubt you, Ralph," said Claude. And Brandon felt half ashamed of the delighted thrill which shot through his heart at these words. What a wonderful caressing music there was in her soft clear tones.

"You judge others by the light of your own honest heart, Claude," he said. "I had not the faintest idea that your father would have made so unjust a distribution of his wealth. Need I assure you that I consider the *whole* of it only trust money, to be managed for your benefit. I will never use it."

"What do you propose to do, then?" she asked anxiously, resting her eyes on his as she spoke.

"I will not take your heritage from you, Claude. I have not fallen so low as to take advantage of what I consider your father's temporary insanity. I consider that last will of his null and void. You are his natural heir. I shall act as his executor, as your guardian, if you wish it, during your minority, and on your coming of age, or on your marriage, hand over your fortune, I hope, enhanced, to your own management."

"I do not wish this, Ralph. It is too much. My father trusted you, believed in you, and, in a way, wished to leave his money to us both. Let us be just to one another. I will be glad of your help and pleased to have you as my guardian, but I will *not* take all this money from you. Let us share and share alike. Money is important to you—you told me so. I shall have more than enough. Then you will be free to

follow the career, whatever it may be, you have chosen. How pleased I should be to hear your first speech in Parliament."

Brandon shook his head.

"Yes, if you please—you must do as I wish," insisted Claude, with a kind of sweet imperiousness.

"My dear Claude, suppose we leave the question of division or no division until you reach that venerable period of life when the law will allow you to *act* as well as to speak. Till then we can do nothing. He paused, looking down, as if deeply interested in the bearskin rug on which he stood. Then, suddenly lifting up his deep sombre eyes to Claude's, he said softly, "I am infinitely relieved to find you understand, you believe in me, in spite of appearances, which are, I grant, unfortunately against me. I was, I must say, rather uneasy about your future, after you had resisted your father's wishes in a matter which he considered important. Since that you must have observed that he was less anxious to have me with him, and his apparent cessation of interest made me fear some current of feeling inimical to us both. For, curiously enough, our mutual determination not to link our lives has cemented what is, I hope, a sound and lasting friendship. I quite expected that we should *both* be left out of Mr. Tracey's will; as it is, no difficulty need occur. I have made up my mind, and as a certain period of action must elapse before I can render up an account of my stewardship, I want to make that period as pleasant as possible to you."

"You are very good to me, Mr. Brandon. I——"

"Mr. Brandon?" he interrupted reproachfully.

"Ought I to call my guardian by his Christian name? It would not be reverent."

"You will revert to Ralph unconsciously. But to return. I suppose you would prefer living with your aunt to an establishment of your own?"

"Yes, certainly. The very sound of 'an establishment' of my own suggests the abomination of desolation."

"It is a very modest sort of home, still——"

"Quite grand enough for my means," put in Claude.

"Then I should like to see Major and Mrs. Selby and arrange the question of ways and means."

"Pray, make your terms liberal in every way."

"Very well—suited to a young lady who has come into the half of her kingdom?" asked Brandon, smiling.

"Exactly," returned Claude, flushing with pleasure, as she sat down with an air of relief. "Then I shall want a dress and privy-purse allowance."

"Granted, but you must name the sum."

"I will consult my aunt about it, and let you know. And, Mr. Brandon—Ralph—one thing more. Do you think I might have some horses?"

"Yes, I think you might. Not a stud exactly, but——"

"Oh, no; but I should like a nice, strong, handsome horse for Uncle Selby, and one that Kate and Janet and I could ride by turns, and—and you will ride with us, sometimes, when you care to come?"

"Thank you," said Brandon quickly. "You are a most considerate ward. Will you make me your master of the horse? No, your riding master?"

"That would be very nice, but you have no time for such puerile pursuits. Still, if you can——"

"No, I certainly am not my own master."

"Surely you are now—now that you are, in a sense, a man of fortune?"

Brandon smiled and shook his head. "I am not going to let you pry into my finances, Mademoiselle Claude. By the way, here is a tolerably full account of what property your father left. I have put it on paper that you may show it to your uncle and discuss it with him if you will. Of course you do not touch it until you are of age." He took a long envelope from his pocket and gave it to her.

"Thank you. Now we shall see what is yours."

"And," continued Brandon, "you can advise with your aunt and Major Selby what amount ought to be fixed for your allowance. Do not stint yourself. It is time you tasted the joys of youth unhampered by the restrictions of narrow means. I trust, my dear ward, there are many happy days before you. You will find me an indulgent guardian, only when the time comes for you to ask my consent to replace me with a nearer and dearer protector, I shall be *very* hard to please."

"Ah!" cried Claude with a wise little nod, "that is my affair; as long as there is no tangible objection, you have no right to refuse your consent."

"Why, you seem quite up in a guardian's whole duties."

Claude laughed. Her laugh, if rare, was singularly sweet and refined, yet full of merriment.

"She is changed already," thought Brandon, as he looked gravely at her. "She feels her feet are on sure ground. Is she thinking of that young German soldier who seems to have taught her the difference *between* love and friendship?"

"Shall I see your uncle before I go?" he asked.

"I think he has just gone out."

"I shall ask him to meet me again at Hobson's office. I should like him to be well informed respecting our management of your affairs, Claude. He is your nearest friend, and an honest one. Well, if Mrs. Selby is at home, I should like to pay my respects to her."

"Oh, yes, I will call her," said Claude with alacrity. Her keen, sympathetic instinct told her that Mrs. Selby had a half-unconscious, but decided unfriendly distrust of Brandon.

Claude left the room, and her guardian remained in deep thought, leaning back in the corner of the sofa, his head on his hands.

Mrs. Selby was more gracious than usual, and was really pleased with Brandon's air of quiet sincerity, when he assured her that it was an infinite relief to him to know that his ward had a safe and suitable home in her aunt's house, adding that "I shall have the great advantage of your and Major Selby's co-operation in all matters connected with Miss Tracey's every-day life. You will decide with her what sum ought to be allotted for her allowance. In deciding this, pray remember that Miss Tracey must consider herself a young lady of fortune. I am sure you will do me the justice of believing that I could never consent to accept the very extraordinary bequest of my old friend. Major Selby and I will have a discussion on this subject."

A little more talk, chiefly about Tibbets, for whose comfort and maintenance Claude was anxious, then Brandon rose to take leave.

"I dine with Lady Elmslie to-day," he said. "You know, I suppose, that she called at Lichfield Terrace to inquire for you?"

"I do. Pray give her my kind regards and thanks."

"I will. Of course you and Mrs. Selby will receive her now."

"Yes, certainly," said both together.

"I begin to think Mr. Brandon a good right-minded man," said Mrs. Selby approvingly, when she was alone with her niece. "I did doubt him; he seemed to me selfish and designing. He is very distinguished-looking, don't you think so?" Claude did not answer —she was in deep thought, her eyes gazing far away.

CHAPTER XV.

"FENCING."

THE days succeeding this sudden and important change in Claude Tracey's life flew past with surprising rapidity. For Brandon, they were inconveniently crowded, as much unavoidable work was pressed to his already occupied time. Still he contrived frequent visits to Gainsborough Gardens, where he was most cordially received by the frank, hospitable master, with whom he was a prime favourite. In the simple, natural, kindly atmosphere of Claude's new home, Brandon himself seemed to grow younger and more genial. He enjoyed the music provided by Claude and Kate; he liked exchanging Indian experiences with Major Selby, or discussing questions of

military reform and European armaments, for the Major understood his own trade.

It was a new kind of life for Brandon, but, for some occult reason, he found it wonderfully pleasant and interesting. He unbent so far as to exchange repartees and flirt in a very open manner with Kate, and reply gravely to the serious questioning of Janet.

"I am growing quite a family man," he said, one evening when he and Major Selby had been rebuked by the lady of the house for their prolonged *tête-à-tête* after dinner. "Since I have had a load of care imposed upon me, by my guardianship of a young lady, I am naturally glad to lighten it by taking frequent counsel with your husband, whose experience is most valuable. Were I Claude's godfather, it would be nothing compared to being her guardian."

"Why do you not say grandfather at once, Mr. Brandon?" said Kate saucily, as she handed him a cup of coffee.

"No, Miss Selby. Father, if you will—but I am justified in rejecting the more ancient appellation. Even Claude, who looks upon me as a most venerable squaretoes, does not go so far back—eh, Claude?"

"No, certainly not. And you are growing younger, indeed, even frivolous, in spite of your troubles about me. Will they soon be over?"

"Not while you are a minor, nor even after, unless a better and more permanent care-taker is appointed. I do not know that my work will ever end."

"Shall I never be able to take care of myself?"

"I am not sure. You must be educated to that end. Major Selby and I must see to your training."

Here Janet, who had "blue tendencies," observed

that she thought it would be a very good thing if women were trained to business more often than they are, a notion pooh-poohed by her father. At the next pause, Claude said, more to herself than to her guardian :

"I have never seen anything you have written. I should like to read some of your books or papers."

"I have never attempted a book, and I fear you would find my lucubrations rather dry and uninteresting."

"Ah ! that means that they are above my comprehension."

"Have you nothing suited to the meanest capacity?" asked Kate, with her graceful head a little on one side.

"No, my writing appeals to the highest intelligence only."

"How disappointing !"

"Never mind, do let us see *something*," urged Claude.

"You might give us an explanatory lecture after we have studied the subject," suggested Kate.

"Lady Elmslie reads your writings, and I suppose understands them," said Claude gravely.

"Lady Elmslie is—well, some years your senior, and has lived in the world, where people talk about the topics I treat even when they do not understand them."

"What a muddle they must get into," said Kate.

"Lady Elmslie has had a very bad cold," observed Claude. "She was downstairs again, though, when I went to see her to-day. She asked about you."

"Indeed ! I must try and call," said Brandon. "Now let us have the 'concord of sweet sounds,'

a song and duet, for I must leave you early. I have an appointment with your uncle, Claude, for to-morrow morning. What for do you think?"

"I have not the least idea."

"To inspect a wonderful lady's horse which is for sale—an animal blest with all the qualities that can adorn a steed, and further, a superior hack, strongly recommended as a weight-carrier."

"How delightful!" The exclamation burst from all three girls at once.

* * * * *

Lady Elmslie's cold worried and depressed her. It was in her opinion a most unlucky *contretemps*. To be shut in her room, when she wanted to be up and doing, was intolerable. It was, she felt, a critical time now, when she intended to keep Claude constantly under her own eye, to keep the threads of the mesh, in which she was anxious to entangle Brandon, in her own hands, to pull the wires as she chose; to be kept helplessly indoors now—worst of all, to feel unequal to the task she had set herself, was too bad. Why, it was nearly a month since she had seen or heard of Brandon. She had never had an opportunity of speaking to him in private since the great change in his fortunes.

She was very anxious to know what he intended to do, for she knew him well enough to doubt his appropriating the whole of the property bequeathed to him by Mr. Tracey. "He will do something quixotic, I am sure. Now he might be quite generous enough to earn a high character, and yet not despise himself. How much this new relationship of guardian and ward will throw them together? Will he always be

blind to the charm of the sort of reserved force which even *I* can perceive in that quiet little girl? Does the mortification of her refusal still act as a repellent power? Probably she is too simple, too immature, to satisfy such a man as Ralph Brandon. Who could dream that so cold, so self-contained a creature as he has become was once such a charming, such an ideal lover! Had I married him, should I have loved him as I do? Perhaps not! Well, then, thank Heaven for the circumstances which preserved this passion for the *bonne-bouche* of my life. I deserve some reward for the patience and endurance of the past—nearly ten years. Shall I ever rekindle the extinct fire? It is a forlorn hope, but it gives existence some zest." So musing, Lady Elmslie drew her writing book to her and wrote a brief note asking Brandon to take pity on an invalid and dine with her the following day. Brandon, somewhat pricked by conscience for his neglect of so old an acquaintance, gave up a previous engagement and obeyed her summons.

The fair viscountess was looking pale and languid when Brandon was shown in. Her semi-invalid wrapper and mufflings of lace, which her convalescent condition demanded, were most graceful and becoming, and lightened the deep black of her mourning.

"I began to think you had cut me for ever, Ralph," she said, stretching out her hand to him, without rising from her low chair.

"I am not surprised, Lady Elmslie. But since Mr. Tracey's death, I have not had a moment to myself, though his affairs were in excellent order, still there was a great deal to be done; but it is nearly all fin-

ished, I am glad to say, for I want to run over to Switzerland next month on a literary mission."

"Ah, well, you must tell me about everything, Ralph, after dinner," she said, as it was announced and she took his arm.

"I fear you have been more seriously ill than I thought," he said kindly. "You look so pale and languid, and by no means steady on your feet."

"I think I tormented myself a good deal," she said, glancing up at him. "But I shall soon get right, when I can go out."

While the servants waited, Brandon and his hostess had plenty of abstract topics to discuss. Both knew their world well, its high lights and its shadows. But when coffee had been served in Lady Elmslie's pretty little private sitting-room, and they were alone, she arranged the cushions in her chair more comfortably, and with a sweet laughing glance, said:

"Well, Ralph?"

"Well, Lady Elmslie, what is it?" he returned, smiling.

"I want the full, true, and particular account of old Mr. Tracey's wonderful will. You know I have never had a chance of a quiet talk with you since his death."

"No, I think not. Yet I have very little to tell that you do not already know. The old miser left all his money to me, with the exception of a beggarly pittance to his daughter."

"As much as she wanted, I dare say. And was this splendid bequest unhampered by any condition? You are not enjoined to marry the disinherited one, eh?"

"No. I suppose Mr. Tracey knew the impossibility of such a thing."

"Then, my dear Ralph, I trust you are not going to commit any outrageous act of sentimental generosity, and give her the half of your kingdom?"

Brandon thought for a moment, and then replied: "No, I shall try to be just—but what my justice will be remains to be proved—at least until she is of age."

"I mistrust you, Ralph," and Lady Elmslie held up a warning finger. "Now tell me what are your plans for her?"

"I have none. Things have arranged themselves."

"But you are not going to let her live on with those excellent but rather bourgeois relatives?"

"She could not do better. You must see yourself that they are gentry. She is perfectly happy with them—in fact, I don't suppose she would leave them to please me."

"But, Ralph, later, when her mourning is over, she must go into society, real society. You can never find a proper *parti* for her among the Gainsborough Gardens set."

"Why should I find a *parti* for her? She will manage that for herself."

"Perhaps after all you may prefer carrying out Papa Tracey's scheme?"

"What! marry her myself! No, thank you, Lady Elmslie. The experiment of proposing to my ward is one I never wish to repeat. To feel oneself small, even to nothingness, is not an agreeable sensation, I assure you."

"Are you *quite* sure you never wish to repeat the experiment?"

Brandon, who had just lighted a cigarette, took it from his lips and held it for a moment, as he looked keenly at her.

"You seem to have a fixed idea on that subject," he said.

"No, no. By no means fixed. But you know I really have a high opinion of your little ward. She has immense capabilities—she is naturally *grande dame*, and I should not like to see her thrown away on some better class of 'Arry!"

"Better leave her to herself. She has a shrewd idea of what she wants; but she has, so far as I can make out, no ambition."

"Nevertheless it would he a great relief to your mind if she were married out of the way. I can't help thinking that you might do a double-edged act of beneficence by marrying her to your cousin Sir Philip Brandon."

"Philip Brandon! Why, what can have suggested such an idea?"

"Oh, I can scarcely tell. Sir Philip is not a bad fellow, and is rather an attractive man. Then he is young and sunny, which would suit her. She is just a shade too pensive."

"I do not think it would be exactly conscientious on my part to pay my cousin's debts with my ward's money."

"Ah! then you are going to give up Mr. Tracey's bequest. A paltry six thousand pounds would not go far in paying Sir Philip's debts."

Brandon's lip curled with a contemptuous smile. "It would be a pity to deprive you of the amusement that guessing at my possible intentions evidently

affords you. Philip's debts are not overwhelming—and, as you say, he is rather a good than a bad fellow—but he would never suit Miss Tracey."

"You are quite sure?"

"Yes, quite."

"Ah! Ralph, never say that of any woman until the man has made love to her."

"Still——" He paused.

"Will you bet me—what?—a pony?—that he could not succeed?"

"Certainly not," looking rather sternly at her. "With *you* to back him, he might."

"Do you think me capable of foul play?"

"No. Far from it—at least conscious foul play."

There was a pause. Then Lady Elmslie, looking at a ring which she was turning round on her finger, asked, "Do you remember our last bet, Ralph?"

"I am not sure. Was it at the Atherly Steeple Chase?"

"Yes. How splendidly you rode! Do you ride now?"

"Not often, since I came back from India."

"How well I remember that steeple chase!" said Lady Elmslie, raising her fine eyes, and gazing away into the bygone time. Brandon, too, was thoughtful—recalling the past no doubt, she thought—till he said, rather abruptly, "Claude Tracey wants to ride. Selby and I saw a very nice lady's horse that may suit her, yesterday. She is a feather-weight, and will look well *en amazone.*"

Lady Elmslie grew very white. Was this what he had been thinking of?

There was a minute's silence. Brandon did not

see the change in his companion's expression. She was the first to speak.

"You don't keep horses, I think, Ralph?" in her usual easy tone.

"No. I have had enough to do to keep myself!"

"I am *so* glad all that is over. You must start a stud now, and ride with *me* sometimes."

"That certainly is a temptation," said Brandon, smiling pleasantly—but he did not say he would buy horses.

"I must go away to the country and ride," she resumed. "You know poor Lord Elmslie left me my pretty ponies, and my saddle horse. You have noticed my chestnut, Cedric? They are eating their heads off down at C——. I suppose I cannot indulge even in the innocent amusement of riding while I am in such deep mourning. I shall leave town as soon as the weather is warmer. It is deadly dull here. Why, I was quite glad to admit that droll Captain O'Hara, the other day! He brought me such a pretty *bonbonnière*, encrusted with turquoises and pearl, from poor Philip Brandon, who is wandering about the south of France and practising economy."

"Poor fellow! If he sticks to that for two or three years, he will come all right."

"I think of renting a place on the north-west coast for the autumn. It belongs to a cousin of the Elmslies, a Manchester man. He has another place somewhere, which his wife prefers. There is good shooting, and I may have my friends about me in a quiet way. I will ask your ward to stay with me, and you shall come and give her riding lessons," and her eyes lit up with a joyous expression, as if at the happy *idea*.

"You are very good, Lady Elmslie. In my fatherly position, as guardian, I thank you heartily for your kind thought. We'll have some jolly rides, and many opportunities of admiring Cedric and his mistress."

Lady Elmslie shook her head. "Nonsense, Ralph. I begin to feel quite elderly."

"By Jove! *I* do—since I have had the cares of a father imposed upon me."

"Thank Heaven, that with the care comes the cure. Isn't it delightful to feel that one has money enough? Is there anything on earth so hateful as poverty and the insignificance to which poverty condemns you?"

"Yes, money is good. But as to poverty, what *you* would call poverty would suffice for all the comforts and enjoyments of life to many. Now there are Major and Mrs. Selby, I don't suppose they muster a thousand a year."

"The rent of a decent house," murmured Lady Elmslie.

"Yet happier people I never met. I find time slip away with amazing rapidity when I am there. Their house is pretty and comfortable. They have educated their daughters well (really Miss Selby's singing is very charming, especially in duets with Claude). Dinner is good, though simple, and well enough served to satisfy any reasonable being. A tone of healthy cheerfulness pervades the house, and—what more do you want?"

"My dear Ralph," said Lady Elmslie, with a sweet yet slightly mocking smile. "I do not think your testimony on the subject of dinner admissible, con-

sidering that for two or three years you could dine with that miser once a week at least."

"I am not an epicure perhaps, but——"

"Now, pray do not tell me you do not care much what you eat; that is a phrase I particularly dislike. It gives me a low opinion of the speaker—his intellect, I mean. Clever men, ay, and women too, care a good deal for what they eat."

"Then, believe me, I was not going to say anything of the kind. Pray do not consider me a blockhead."

"I consider you—well, not a blockhead, Ralph," returned Lady Elmslie, giving him a lingering glance, half sad, half appealing, "only a highly intellectual icicle."

"Perhaps the ice is necessary to the intellect. Too much fire may fuse the brains into *con*fusion."

"Who can tell, Ralph? Would it be proper to ask Captain O'Hara to dinner?"

"What, alone? No, certainly not."

"Then will you come to do propriety?"

"Why? Would you ask me to do third? Ask Miss Tracey and make it a *parti carré*, then."

"I will do better still. I will ask Major and Mrs. Selby also. She will be a bore, I daresay, but it will be civil, and such a party cannot be construed into riotous living. Then we shall all be in mourning for our nearest and dearest."

Brandon laughed, and began to roll another cigarette.

"Have you seen that the member for Eastcliffe is supposed to be in very indifferent health, and is likely to resign his seat?"

"Yes, somebody told me something about it."

"Was it not Lord H——?"

She named one of the chief men on the Liberal side.

"I have not the honour of his aquaintance."

"But you know his private secretary, which is the same thing, only more so."

"Oh, yes, I have met Sinclair."

"And will you not take the opportunity if it offers and offer yourself to the deserted constituency? You can venture into public life *now.*"

Brandon leant back in his chair with half-closed eyes.

"How do you know I ever cared to enter into public life?"

"I—I divined it. When one is in very strong sympathy with a friend, there are looks, intonations, half-uttered sentences, which indicate unerringly how the current of wishes and aspirations run, and that was why I rather wanted you to marry Miss Tracey. Things have arranged themselves better, and you are free."

"You are really a very steadfast friend, Lady Elmslie. Yes, one day I should like to go into Parliament, but not at present, and not for Eastcliffe."

"Ah, Ralph, I see you do not mean to confide in me. No matter, I have remarkable powers of divination where *you* are concerned. I shall see you leader of the Liberals, or perhaps of some wonderful new development of party, the High Tory Liberals, or Conservative Radical reformers, or some such amazing amalgamation."

"All things are possible 'in the coming by and by,'" he replied.

Soon after, Brandon took leave, accompanying his "good-night" with words of kindly caution.

"You ought to take care of yourself, Lady Elmslie. You don't look quite the thing, and you change colour as I have never noticed before."

"Never, Ralph? Are you quite sure?"

"Well, I speak only of this present period! Adieu."

* * * * *

"Curious woman. I am glad she has taken a fancy to Claude. She may be a good friend, but she little knows the happy independence of my little ward, her freedom from social ambition and from restless craving for that which satisfieth not. She would not like poverty; she appreciates all that is beautiful and refined, yet poverty would not frighten her. There is an atmosphere of divine repose about that child. To think that she is old Tracey's daughter. To think that Philip Brandon should ever lift his commonplace eyes to her. Why does not Lady Elmslie marry him herself? They would suit each other admirably." Then Brandon roused himself, and resolutely banishing his ward and her possible suitors from his thoughts, applied himself to read the letters he found awaiting him when he reached his rooms.

CHAPTER XVI.

"A HOUSE PARTY."

WHAT bright, swift-flying hours made up the months which intervened between John Tracey's death and the autumn of that eventful year.

The happiness of being in a real home, of enjoying her favourite pursuits in company with her favourite cousin; the delights of riding with Major Selby and Brandon, who often contrived to snatch a few hours from his work to accompany her; the sense of bringing an increase of pleasure and ease to the relatives she loved so heartily—all combined to make these halcyon days indeed. Sometimes the great O'Hara joined them in their equestrian expeditions, and Kate flirted with him in the most open manner—to every one's amusement.

Meantime Lady Elmslie had been absent for some time and made no sign. Claude and Kate began to look anxiously for some tidings of the charming widow, as both hoped her promised invitation would include the latter. Brandon had started on a tour of some weeks in Bohemia, with some literary object, and had written Claude several delightful letters, descriptive of the quaint old towns and villages among which he had been wandering.

Major and Mrs. Selby were talking of a visit to Wales, that the former might enjoy some fishing, the only sport left to a poor man, he said, and Claude felt

a little unsettled as to what she should do, when the long expected letter from Lady Elmslie arrived.

"DEAR MISS TRACEY," it began, "(Claude looks really too familiar on paper), as my movements have been uncertain, I delayed writing to you. I am now, however, on my way to Becksdale, the place I have taken for the autumn, which is a charming spot for a short stay. Here I hope you will join me, as soon as I see that things are in order. Pray send down your horse, or horses, for my stud is not extensive, and the rides are lovely. I shall be delighted if your cousin, Miss Selby, will come with you. Pray tell her so, but I will write separately to her. Warn her that there will be no gaieties. Any news of Brandon?

"Ever yours, most sincerely,

"B. ELMSLIE."

"How nice and kind. How delightful to have you too, Kate," cried Claude.

"And how delightful for me," exclaimed Kate. "Let us make our preparations at once, for I suppose Lady Elmslie's next letter will fix the day for our journey."

* * * * *

Becksdale Hall was an old place, overlooking a wild open park, sparsely dotted with trees which sloped down to the embouchure of a river flowing into a large, land-locked bay. A sunk fence separated it from a garden rising in terraces, till it reached the summit of the hill, where an ivy-covered wall was over-topped by the woods above, out of which the space of garden seemed squarely cut. The house lay to the east of this pleasure ground, a grey struc-

ture much patched and added to; large projecting windows commanded views of sea and land, while the entrance was at the opposite side and approached by an avenue well sheltered by oak and elm trees. The neighbouring woods and moorland afforded abundant sport, and the surrounding hills offered happy hunting-grounds for picnics and excursions.

It was the end of a drenching day, which had begun in sunshine when they left London, that Claude and her cousin reached the little station of Thirlstane, which was within about four miles of Becksdale.

Here Lady Elmslie's brougham awaited them, and even through the driving mist they could see the country was beautiful.

"What inhospitable, odious weather!" exclaimed Lady Elmslie when she had welcomed them cordially. "If it were a sunny shower of tears of joy at your arrival, I could forgive the barometer, but *this* is too horrid. Come to my room and have some tea. You have had a long tiresome journey."

"No, indeed, it has been delightful from beginning to end," exclaimed Kate, as they adjourned to Lady Elmslie's morning room, where tea was served. It was a picturesque room with projecting windows, cosy corners and a glass door opening into the conservatory.

"The light that surrounded *you*, Miss Selby, must be, I fancy, all from within, if you could enjoy a railway journey in such weather," said Lady Elmslie with a smile, and she applied herself to administer tea to her tired guests. "This is such a nice old house, rather rambling and ghostlike in places, and by no

means gorgeous in its appointments, but I hope I shall be able to make my autumnal picnic comfortable, as well as pleasant, to my friends. Indeed, one is impossible without the other. We shall only be a small party; a brother in-law of mine, a nice old thing, quite an old beau, is staying with me. If either of you young ladies had been going out in London, you would have been sure to have met him. He is the only member of the Grantley family who has an insufficiency of this world's goods, and, as usual, is the most agreeable of them all. He always reminds me of Major Pendennis, only he has more heart and less head. Then there is the young son of my friend, Lady Elizabeth Langley. The place is the Langleys'. They are abroad and did not know what to do with this boy, so I asked him here. He generally bestows his company on the keepers, and gives me no trouble. I expect Captain O'Hara and your guardian, Miss Tracey, but when the latter will appear it is impossible to say. We have one or two rather pleasant neighbours; so with fishing, riding, music, we must try and piece our programme as best we can."

"You seem to me rich in materials, Lady Elmslie," said Claude, "and you have left out reading, which is a grand ingredient."

"Yes, you are right. There is a library here, too, full of quaint old books, and I have a box from Mudie's every fortnight."

"Then what more can we require?" cried Kate, as she rose to follow her hostess to the room allotted to her and Claude, where all possible comfort seemed to have been provided with thoughtful care.

Kate was a great success that evening. Her bright

good humour and unaffected talk helped things immensely. It was rather difficult, Lady Elmslie thought, to make things "go" when the members of the party were so foreign to each other as a boy from Sandhurst, an old world-worn London man, and two girls fresh from the schoolroom. Both the boy and the beau, however, were charmed with Kate. The touch of nature in her melted the reserve of the one and the conventionality of the other.

Lady Elmslie, in spite of her intuitive fears, sat talking to Claude, who was a delightful listener, and interested her hostess by the strange mixture of liking and distrust which she awakened. Lady Elmslie was a lover of music, though not much of a musician, and was surprised and pleased with Kate's singing and the duet between the cousins, so the first evening passed more successfully than she expected.

The next day broke bright and fair. The cousins were enchanted with the beautiful outlook from their windows, and when they descended they found Lady Elmslie radiant over her letters.

"I have a note from the great O'Hara," she said at breakfast. "He has been at the Liverpool races, and is staying somewhere in the neighbourhood. He writes to know if he may come the day after to-morrow (he had a floating engagement to me), and asks leave to bring Sir Philip Brandon. I think we must grant our royal consent. What do you say?"

"Yes, certainly," cried Claude, who, suspecting the strong but subdued liking he had inspired in Kate, blushed from the earnestness of her wish that he might come in a way that suggested hope to Lady Elmslie.

"I fancy he knows you are here," she continued. "Both men are capital companions in the country. Captain O'Hara has picked up a couple of horses for me, and is going to send them on at once. We must try their mettle. How I wish Mr. Brandon would write."

"So do I," echoed Claude cordially; "he is always interesting, and though he is so grave and quiet, I fancy he enjoys himself."

"Perhaps," returned Lady Elmslie doubtfully, "but he has been cruelly disappointed in more ways than one. However, there may be compensation before him."

The morning was spent very agreeably, inspecting the stables and rambling in the grounds. After luncheon the boy persuaded Kate to mount a steady old cob and allow him to accompany and guide her to a picturesque ruined tower, while the beau, who always breakfasted in his room, was not visible before luncheon. He had an immense correspondence of the greatest importance with very high and mighty personages; at least, a few cleverly dropped hints conveyed this impression. He went gaily and gallantly forth to drive Claude in a mail-phaeton, while Lady Elmslie, complaining of a slight headache, stayed at home. So the evening and the morning were the first day, and both Claude and Kate thought it very good.

The fine weather continuing, the second day was spent out of doors, much like the first. On returning from a riding expedition, which included Lady Elmslie, they met the waggonette going to meet the expected guests.

"Come, let us mend our pace," said the hostess,

"I must be ready to receive the new arrivals," and the party pressed forward gaily.

Claude caught a glimpse of her cousin's face, as she passed her with the boy, and noticed with some anxiety the beautiful bright colour which had risen in her cheeks, the joyous light in her dark hazel eyes.

"Is she inclined to love Sir Philip Brandon, and is it well for her? Is he worthy of her?" were the questions she asked herself.

"Now, Claude dear, do put on that pretty demi-toilette of grenadine and crape, with the jets,—it becomes you so much,—and I will put on my white silk and black lace. See, here are some charming flowers to brighten us up," and she vanished into her room.

When she reappeared, Claude, after a moment's quiet scrutiny, observed, "I don't think you want much to brighten *you* up, Kate."

The dinner-bell rang just then, and the cousins descended to the smaller of the two drawing-rooms, which looked out over the bay. Claude at once retired with a book into a recess, which was formed by a small corner window looking up the dale, while Kate stood in the bow window, gazing on the waters still glittering in the sunset rays. They were the first to obey the summons, but in a very few minutes the door again opened to admit Sir Philip Brandon. He looked sunburnt and well, but thinner and taller than formerly.

Kate came out of the strong light in which she stood, and advanced to meet him. Sir Philip hesitated an instant, and than sprang forward to take the hand she extended.

"Miss Selby, by all that's lucky! This is most unexpected," he exclaimed in his usual unguarded manner, while his open good-looking face lit up joyfully. "I had not the faintest idea I should meet you here. I thought I was to meet Miss Tracey."

"Here she is. Claude, come out of your corner."

"Why, this is delightful! What a jolly woman Lady Elmslie is to ask us all together! We will ride all over the country, and have no end of larks."

After an interchange of inquiries, Claude resumed her seat, while Sir Philip threw himself on a sofa beside Kate, and began to describe his joy at finding himself in England, looking admiringly at her as he spoke.

On this tableau the door once more opened to admit Captain O'Hara, whose toilette always took a considerable time, and Claude, from her corner, could hardly refrain from audible laughter at the dismayed expression which suddenly replaced the satisfied smirk adorning his countenance as his eyes fell on the happy-looking couple before him.

CHAPTER XVII.

"ON GUARD."

KATE immediately went forward with sparkling eyes and laughing lips, to greet the discomfited O'Hara.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Captain O'Hara, at least to you. I knew you were coming, but you did not know I was here. I don't think you are a bit glad to see me," she exclaimed.

"Is it me not glad to see you?" said O'Hara, in a pathetic injured tone. "Am I the man to quarrel with the sunlight for shining on me? Why, the pleasure just struck me dumb."

"I understand. The effect of excessive joy! Well, here is another shock for you. Here is Miss Tracey," with a slight gesture indicating Claude in her corner.

"Well, it is almost too much for an old fellow's balance," shaking hands with her. "Begad, it's enough to grind a man young again to find such a—such a delightful vision at the end of a dusty journey." Then greetings and inquiries were exchanged.

"Ralph Brandon is in London," said Sir Philip. "I met a man at the races who came over with him. I suppose he is coming down here. You never see him at a race nowadays. He *was* rather keen about them once. He must be as grave as half a dozen judges now he has the care of a young lady on

his hands. I don't think I could sleep at nights, if *I* had such a responsibility."

"You make me feel a ton-weight, at least," returned Claude, laughing. "I hope I do not embitter poor Mr. Brandon's existence too much."

"Not you, faith," cried O'Hara. "If the load is more than he can stand, there is many a one would be ready to bear it for him."

"You are a man of resource, Captain O'Hara," said Claude with a little nod. And Lady Elmslie's appearance changed the conversation. She was quickly followed by Mr. Grantley and young Langley, the former greeting Sir Philip and his friend more politely than warmly.

Grantley was older than O'Hara, by a good many years, and, though carefully dressed in modern fashion, had the ineffaceable stamp of an older period. Looking on him, one felt that his neck wanted the stiff stock, his coat the higher collar, his legs the tight pantaloons, his head a wig *à la* George the Fourth, which were in fashion under the Regency. Still, Mr. Grantley had too much taste—taste which sometimes supplies sense—to affect youth; rather in a way he affected age, hoping to appear younger than he affected to be. He was tall and thin, nature having mercifully spared him the horrors of rotundity, but far from good-looking. His face was broad and somewhat common, adorned with what he considered fine eyes, but which were somewhat lobster like in form and setting. He was, in fact, a harmless gossip, of an easy and somewhat generous nature, pleasant manners and ready tongue. He was the late Lord Elmslie's youngest brother, who had inherited

the smallest portion of his father's wealth, and dissipated a good deal of that. He was attached to his sister-in-law, who had always shown him greater consideration than the rest of the family, and who found him a useful friend in the first isolation of her widowhood. Not that Lady Elmslie was a woman to allow the world to dictate its terms to her: none knew better than herself the safety which lies in a grasp strong enough to crush the nettle's sting.

"My neighbours are late," she said. "I have asked Colonel Clavering and his mother to dinner. They live at Thirlstane Manor, that sweet old place beyond the railway you admired the other day. She is a dear old lady. Colonel Clavering only succeeded to the property two years ago. I used to know them when I stayed here long ago, when you were a little fellow in knickerbockers, Jack"—to young Langley. "Do you know Colonel Clavering?"

"I have met him," returned Mr. Grantley. "Wasn't there a curious story about him and a Begum, a sort of princess, when the 24th Dragoons were at Mustaphabad."

"I don't know. Really you have the most appalling memory. It is well for this world you are a man of honour, or what enormous black-mail you might levy on society," said Lady Elmslie, laughing.

"What it is to jump to conclusions," cried Grantley. "I can tell you that Clavering came right well out of the affair, and they say the Begum gave him some of the finest pearls and rubies to be found in India, for his wife, when he had one."

"What a nice dear," cried Lady Elmslie.

"Colonel Clavering must be a most desirable *parti*," said Kate aside to her chum, Jack Langley.

"Yes," put in Grantley, "but the devil's own temper. Flogged a native servant to death in his griff-days, and smashed——"

"Colonel and Mrs. Clavering!" announced the butler.

There was the usual process of welcome and recognition, and before this was over, the magic words, "Dinner is on the table," put the party in motion. Mr. Grantley took Mrs. Clavering, O'Hara was allotted to Kate, Colonel Clavering to Claude, and Lady Elmslie appropriated Sir Philip.

Claude glanced up at her cavalier not altogether without apprehension. He was a tall, gaunt, very dark man, with flashing impatient black eyes, thick black brows, and a military carriage. He gave one comprehensive look at his small slight companion, and opened the conversation by asking rather abruptly—"I fancy I saw you riding with young Langley a few days ago down the Lower Thirlstane Road?"

"Yes, very likely. I often ride with him."

"There is rather a nice ride through my place, and up along round that way—it would have saved you some miles of dusty road."

"Thank you. We must try it some other day."

A considerable pause, during which Sir Philip, at Claude's other side, made himself very agreeable.

Presently Colonel Clavering resumed: "You know Brandon—Ralph Brandon, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," brightening up. "He is my guardian."

"Hum, ah, just so! I thought you were the young lady to whom he has the honour of being guardian."

"Then you know him too?"

"We were great chums in India, but I have seen very little of him of late years. He used to be a first-rate fellow, a great hand at pig-sticking."

"At what?" asked Claude, a good deal puzzled.

"Boar-hunting is the more euphonious word. We always say pig-sticking in India."

"Why not say what sounds best?"

"Fine words do not come naturally to English lips."

"Nor pretty ones, either!"

"Perhaps not. I hope you have not learned to find foreign delicacies preferable to English solids?"

"Do you think delicacies are to be found out of England?"

"Good. I see we think alike in one direction."

"There are very good things to be found out of England, too, Colonel Clavering. *I* was very happy in Germany."

"Perhaps you brought the good things with you. How is it that women like the Continent better than men do?"

"Do they? Well, yes, I think they do, and somehow it seems natural they should."

"How do you make that out?"

"I can't exactly tell, I have not thought about it."

"Oh, you *think*, do you?"—bluntly.

"Yes," said Claude, looking at him, a smile gleaming in her eyes; "don't you?"

Colonel Clavering laughed, a deep harsh laugh.

"Fairly hit! Well, not much. I have nothing to think about," he said.

"Nothing to think about! Why, it seems to me

here are so many things to think of and puzzle bout, that life is not long enough to get to the end f them."

"Does that make you better or worse? I mean appier or the other thing?"

"I cannot tell, nor can I help thinking. But I am ery happy—very, very happy," with a smile so leeply, quietly content, that Colonel Clavering felt it was like a glimpse of heaven. Being an inarticulate, however, he only stared at her and said, "That's all right, stick to that."

"What profound discussion are you carrying on, Miss Tracey?" asked Sir Philip. "I catch the words 'thought' and 'happiness,' etc. Can't you take in a poor ignoramus and enlighten him?"

"Both Colonel Clavering and I are rather in a mist, I assure you."

Here Clavering attracted Claude's attention. "Who is that handsome girl opposite, talking to O'Hara?"

"That is my cousin, Miss Selby."

"Oh, ah, indeed. There was a Selby in the Madras Cavalry when I first went out to India, a tall fellow, used to do feats of strength. Any relation?"

"Her father, I think, and my uncle."

"Well, she is not unlike the Selby I mean. But a deuced deal better looking." Here Mr. Grantley addressed some question to Clavering, and the conversation became general.

After dinner, when all were assembled in the drawing-room, Clavering took up a position beside Kate, with rather the air of a proprietor. Whereupon Sir Philip devoted himself to Claude, and Lady Elmslie demanding music, both gentlemen made themselves

obnoxious by trying to turn over the leaves at the same time. Mrs. Clavering, a quiet, dignified old lady, seemed glad to sit down to a game of—now rarely played—Piquet with Mr. Grantley. Kate's singing greatly enchanted Colonel Clavering, and what between his loudly expressed admiration of her voice and his various reminiscences respecting her father, he had so much to say, that no one else could get in a word.

Then the little party broke up after arranging an expedition under Clavering's guidance to explore a certain rocky gorge some eight or nine miles distant, after partaking of luncheon at Thirlstane Manor, the day but one following.

"Are you tired?" asked Colonel Clavering, as they drove homewards, for, in spite of his rugged exterior, his heart was tender and true towards his mother.

"No, thank you, dear. I have rather enjoyed myself. Lady Elmslie is a charming creature. I am not sure it is well for her to have so decided a *vaurien* as Sir Philip Brandon staying in her house."

"Why not? Brandon has been a little extravagant, has gone the pace a little too fast, but there isn't a whisper against him. By Jove, you don't often find three such attractive women in so small a space. Lady Elmslie is a regular beauty; the little heiress, if she is an heiress, is a nice, graceful little thing; but Miss Selby is something you don't meet every day."

"She is rather unformed, a little unfinished, don't you think so?"

"No, I do not. There is a delightful naturalness about her, if that's what you mean. I can tell you that girl is the sort men do wild things for."

"My dear boy, don't talk in such a strain. I must say *I* have rarely seen any one quite comparable to Lady Elmslie, and forgive me, Gilbert, if I say it would make me supremely happy if I could see her your wife one of these days."

"What! match-making, mother? Save yourself any trouble on my account. Lady Elmslie will look higher than a simple country gentleman like me." And Colonel Clavering leant back and fell into silence which on the subject of Lady Elmslie and her young guest he never again broke.

* * * * *

The riding party proposed by Colonel Clavering had been most successful. The weather was fine, the horses good, the company congenial. To O'Hara's delight, Sir Philip had established himself as Claude's cavalier, while their host and guide devoted himself to Lady Elmslie and Kate, though gradually the former paired off with O'Hara, leaving Kate and the colonel together. Once or twice Claude made an attempt to join them, for which she was chaffed by Sir Philip, who accused her of being tired of him.

As they approached the house by a road which led along the edge of the park from the land side, Claude, who was in front, descried a figure that seemed familiar, delightfully familiar, descending the doorsteps. At the same time, Lady Elmslie, who was close behind, gave a little cry, and touching her horse with the whip, passed Claude and stopped some yards in advance, leaning down to give her hand to Brandon, who was looking darker than ever from the exposure of travel, but with an air of animation, such as he rarely wore.

"Why, this *is* good of you," cried Lady Elmslie. "I did not expect you till to-morrow at soonest. How did you get here from the station?"

"Well, considering I have been tramping about the Bohemian hills, you don't suppose three or four English miles would be too much for me? I was as anxious as any exile to be among familiar scenery and friendly faces." He returned, assisting her to dismount. "I see there is a good supply of the latter here," and went on to lift Claude from her saddle, while Sir Philip dismounted.

"My dear little ward, how goes it?" he said kindly, softly, holding her for half a minute in his arms. She was so slight and small, it was quite natural to lift her down like a child, and Claude felt suddenly secure and strong, with some one near to whose care and guidance she had a right, on whose consideration she had a claim; the whole place seemed more homelike, the ground under her feet more solid.

"I am *so* glad you have come," she said, pressing his hand and looking up to him, with eyes growing darker and more radiant from the joy of her heart,—"and you have not written for such a long time."

"I will tell you everything to-morrow," he returned, smiling almost like a father, thought Claude, and the next moment the whole party were dismounted, and gathering round the new arrival, exchanging greetings, questions and answers.

O'Hara, as became his character, was keenly alive to the merits of dainty dishes, though no one could stand roughing it better; for several days he had not enjoyed a repast so much. Matters, in his opinion, were drifting in the right direction, and he

absolutely beamed on his young friend, Sir Philip, as he saw him devote himself to the heiress, as O'Hara persisted in considering her, despite the information Lady Elmslie had considerately given him respecting the true position of Miss Tracey's affairs. The sanguine Irishman comforted himself by believing that Brandon was not the sort of fellow that would rob the orphan, and even if he only gave the little darlin' the half of her father's wealth, it wouldn't be a bad catch for Phil Brandon, faith! "Anyway he shows his sense in steering clear of that brown-eyed witch, though I'd forgive a man for losing his head about her. Never thought Philip Brandon would have so much sense," mused his devoted friend. Probably the young baronet would have lost considerably in that friend's estimation could O'Hara have divined the secret of his apparent prudence, his attentions to Claude being prompted by sudden unreasoning jealousy.

The evening went quickly to all but the lady of the house. Brandon was in unusually good spirits, and gave them various anecdotes culled from his late experiences, and O'Hara untiringly held a huge skein of wool which Kate wound into a ball, with a view to knit winter socks for her father, occasionally rebuking Jack Langley for turning out the contents of her work-basket until he went off to the billiard-room, accompanied by Sir Philip, who did not seem at all happy.

At last Lady Elmslie found herself in her room, and soon dismissed her maid. Then she rose, and slowly pacing to and fro, set her subtile brains to work out the pros and cons of her position. "I am

peculiarly placed," she thought. "Ralph has dark nooks of disposition, into which I cannot penetrate. He is strong and determined, yet Claude shall *never* be his wife, never! The obstacles must arise on *her* side, and *I* will build them up. I must be her closest, most confidential friend, for every reason, and Ralph's too, his sympathetic adviser, his——" Her thoughts grew confused, then cleared with a gust of hatred. "I cannot bear that girl, Kate Selby; there is a brutal directness, a savage sort of courage about her, against which even worldly wisdom is no defence, but I am equal to them all, *if* I can keep cool. Now for sleep—I shall trust to myself alone."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"LADY ELMSLIE MAKES UP HER MIND."

When all were discussing their plans for the day, at breakfast the following morning, Brandon, who had been the first to appear and to finish, and was now deep in the newspaper, suddenly looked up, and asked Claude what *she* was going to do.

"Nothing in particular," she returned, looking a little surprised.

"I think you had better not ride—you ought to rest after yesterday's expedition. Suppose you show me the beauties of Becksdale. I have my letters and task to accomplish before luncheon, and then I shall have serious matters to discuss with my ward."

"Very well," she returned, "so long as a scolding is not included."

"I am not so sure," said Brandon gravely; "time will show."

"You ought to have strong nerves, Claude, to live through the morning with such a prospect before you. I am sure Mr. Brandon could be terrific," cried Lady Elmslie.

"A clear conscience will support me," returned Claude.

At luncheon Sir Philip and O'Hara were absent. They had ridden to a place at some distance to look at a couple of horses which O'Hara thought of buying, and were not expected back till late—and Lady Elmslie could find no excuse for interfering with the *téte-à-téte* walk proposed by Brandon. She therefore invited Kate and Mr. Grantley to drive with her, as she had to return the visit of some county magnate who lived seven or eight miles away.

The next day but one was the festival, or rather the martyrdom, of St. Grouse, she reflected, then the men would have ample occupation, and she would have ample opportunity of dealing with Claude, on the lines she had already drawn with a firm hand.

It was a gorgeous autumnal afternoon; the summer had been dry and the sun potent, so the change of the leaf had begun early; already the glowing colours of the "fall" had touched the woods here and there.

In the quaint old-fashioned garden, mignonette and heliotrope gave out their full perfume, the deep-blue sky and placid sea lay cloudless and motionless under the full blaze of sunlight, and the low, slumberous hum of myriad insects filled the air with an under-*current of subdued life.*

In the park, which stretched below the east terrace to the water's edge, the quiet cattle sought the shelter of the scattered groups of trees, or lay down behind such bushes of gorse and underwood as they could find.

When the carriage rolled away, Claude and Brandon stood a moment listening to the breathing stillness, then Brandon said, "And our walk?"

"I will get my hat," replied Claude, returning for a moment to the house.

Brandon awaited her outside, watching her approach with the impression of harmony which she always produced on his senses. Her pretty, fresh gown of black and white muslin with a black sash, marking out her slender, supple waist, the wide-brimmed hat, of white straw, also trimmed with black ribbon, and casting a shadow over her sweet, grave eyes, while it left her delicate mouth and chin in the full light, seemed to suit her as they could nò one else.

"I can take you *such* a charming walk," exclaimed Claude, "if you do not mind it being a little rough."

"I fancy I can stand as much roughness as you can," returned Brandon, smiling down at her, with an expression of joyous content, such as Claude had never noticed before.

"I think your journey did you good," she said, frankly considering him. "You look somehow happier."

"It was not the journey, it is the return from it here that has put new life into my veins," returned Brandon in a low tone, as if speaking to himself.

"Come, we will go through the garden," she said,

not seeming to heed his words, though they returned to her afterwards. "It is terribly hot here, but we shall soon escape from it."

They entered it by a wicket leading from the shrubbery near the house, and, ascending to the topmost terrace, walked along it to the further end.

"What a splendid show of peaches!" observed Brandon, noticing the heavily-laden branches of the fruit-trees nailed against the wall.

"Yes, and the jargonelle plums are very fine. How lovely the view is over the river to that rugged hill and the blue mountains beyond! What a sweet home!"

"Would *you* like to live here? I suppose it would just suit you."

"I am not so sure. I am fond of town life, fonder than Kate is, though you would not believe it. She loves being in the open air and among animals, and all that sort of thing. I am fonder of reading and music——" She paused abruptly, and, turning to him, asked, "Are you really displeased with me in any way?"

"No, certainly not. Why do you imagine it?"

"You seemed to think you might scold me."

Brandon laughed. "I have no idea of forfeiting my privileges," he said, "so I asserted my right to a *tête-à-tête* with my ward on the first opportunity."

"I understand," said Claude, smiling. "Now I shall enjoy my walk." These sentences brought them to the corner of the garden furthest from the house. Here an old door, warped and sun-dried, with a rusty lock, opened under the ivy which hung over it in a tangled mass. At the other side they

stepped from the blazing heat of the garden into the cool, moist shade of the wood beyond. The trees were large and wide-spreading, stretching out their leafy wealth over the tall, waving ferns, the long, tufty grass, and great mossy stones which lay beneath.

"Isn't this delicious?" asked Claude, as they walked side by side.

"It is a very paradise. The beauty of this place is thoroughly English," said Brandon. "That is one of its great charms, yet I wish you could see the Bohemian mountains. There is some beautiful scenery there, too. It has an indescribable stamp of wild sadness; years of misrule, of cruel wars, of intense poverty, have stamped an impress of sorrow upon it. Cheerfulness is the great characteristic of England—of English scenery rather. There is plenty of sorrow and poverty, and desperate struggle here, still there is always more hopefulness with the individual freedom we possess."

"Tell me more," said Claude. "I do not exactly understand what you were looking for in those remote places."

Brandon replied by giving her a sketch of the essay or paper on the early history of Bohemia, including the first appearances of both Jews and gipsies within its borders, which he had been asked to contribute to a new and most learned quarterly, whose editor was one of his particular friends. Claude listened with deep attention and sympathetic eyes, her occasional brief questions showing her unusual appreciation of what most girls would consider a dry subject. This lasted until they reached the summit of the hill, and descended more than half-way down a narrow ravine,

in the centre of which one of the becks or rivulets which abound in those rocky regions chafed and gurgled and rippled on its way to the sea. The carriage road to Becksdale crossed it by a bridge, level with the high ground on either side; under it the pedestrians passed.

"The best is to come," said Claude, after a pause. "We shall get a view of the bay directly."

Brandon did not answer. They were just then in the roughest bit of the way; angles of the rock projected from the ground to trip up the unwary, and a sudden steep drop in the path, which was intersected by rope-like knots of gorse strewn with loose stones and thickly covered with pine-needles, made a helping hand acceptable, so Brandon offered his.

"Thank you. I am learning to be sure-footed while I have a chance," said Claude, shaking her head. "I may not be much in the country in future."

"You can live where you like, Claude."

"I am not sure. I am sometimes afraid I spend too much money, at least it seems so to me, and you must remember I haven't an idea what I really possess."

"I do remember, and I do not think you need trouble yourself till you come of age. Your uncle and I will take care of your property, I assure you, and even under your own suggestion that we should divide it, you need not hesitate to spend twelve or fifteen hundred a year during your minority."

"That seems a quantity, Ralph."

"It is as well you should think so. By the way, I was afraid you had forgotten my Christian name. Why do you call me Mr. Brandon?"

"It was rather disrespectful to call a guardian by his first name. Besides, I want to encourage a spirit of veneration—in myself towards you, I mean. When I first saw you, I was a little—no, not a little—in awe of you—then my awe seemed to fade away."

"I ought to know that pretty well, considering how you treated me," began Brandon, laughing.

"Don't say any more. I hate to be reminded of it," exclaimed Claude, a delicate pink blush spreading even over her little ears.

"And *I* have no right to be proud of the episode, Heaven knows," said Brandon in a low tone, but Claude went on quickly.

"I do not know how it is, either I have grown older, or you younger, but you certainly seem less formidable than you used."

"No matter how I seem, Claude, provided you trust me," returned Brandon, drawing near her.

"I do. You know I do," stretching out her hand to him, "and it is so delightful to trust, to be understood."

Brandon did not answer at once, but he took the hand she had extended, and held it long in a close warm grasp.

"He has more feeling than I suspected," thought Claude, as she gently withdrew her hand, "and he is awfully ashamed of having asked me to marry him."

By this time they had reached a bend in the ravine or dell which suddenly widened the steep sides, sinking abruptly, permitting a glorious view across the wide bay to an undulating coast—where from a dark mass of building arose towers and spires against the clear blue sky.

A short and very steep descent led to the beach. It was a mere strip between the sea and the hills, which rose in places from the water's edge. No frowning cliffs dominated this sheltered shore, no rugged promontories confronted the intrusive waters. The trees grew abundantly to the very sand, short sturdy oaks stretched their gnarled branches over the water at high tide, pine trees mingled their aromatic fragrance with the soft salt sea air, as the little baby waves crept up, lapping the sand with a caressing sound, for the tide was nearly at its height.

"Ah, this is charming," exclaimed Brandon, as Claude pointed silently to the panorama before them.

"Come on, let us get down to the shore ; there are stones and little hillocks there we can sit upon and listen to the waves."

In a few minutes they stood upon the beach. After a short search, Brandon found a big log of wood lying just where the grass ceased and the sand began, of which Claude took possession, while he stretched himself on the sward beside her.

"I feel like a lotus-eater in this delightful atmosphere," he said, after a minute's silence. "Rest and meditation seem, for the moment, the highest happiness, but only for a moment."

"A precious moment," murmured Claude, removing her hat, to let the sweet air play upon her brow. Then they kept silence for a delicious space.

Absorbed in her own somewhat vague thoughts, and in the beauty around them, Claude did not see the steadfast contemplative gaze with which Brandon's eyes dwelt upon her. She was unknowingly tasting the first drops of the heavenly nectar, rare drops of

which are sometimes given to mortals. A quiet, boundless content was filling her soul with a sense of indescribable harmony. As she looked on sea and sky, she saw that they were good with a perfect goodness she had never perceived before, and the chief charm of this all-pervading happiness was its profound peace.

"Life is very sweet, I did not know *how* sweet," she said at last, very soft and low. "This air makes me well and strong, I suppose, for I never felt it quite so sweet before."

Brandon smiled, a wonderful caressing smile, while he looked down to gather some prettily tinted leaves which grew beside him.

"I trust life will always be sweet to you, Claude. It ought to be—you are very good."

"Yes. See how women who are a thousand times better than I am are often tormented. I cannot find from what I read in books, or the little I have seen of life, that goodness is any guarantee for happiness."

"No, not for exterior happiness, but a good conscience is a better foundation to build upon than a bad one, and if conscience is numbed, why chaos is come again," said Brandon.

"Oh, yes, of course." Another pause. "It is delightful to sit here and build castles when one is in such a mood," she resumed.

"And where are your castles located, Claude?" turning a keen glance upon her. "In Spain or Germany?"

"Why in Germany?"

"Oh, because you were educated there, very much

ducated, for besides learning all the 'ologies, had ou not a young soldier-professor who taught you hat love was, eh, Claude?"

She smiled thoughtfully. "He did not teach *me* hat love is, Ralph, he showed me what it was ike."

"He must have been a clumsy teacher if he could ot go a step further. Have you no lingering tender- ess for the amicable young lieutenant?"

"I have a very kind feeling for him, but if you now things, people, life, as I believe you do, you would know better than I could tell you that I did not love him, and I never should love him, that is, if you remember how I spoke of him."

"You did not say anything unkind," said Brandon, rather surprised at her earnestness.

"No, but I spoke slightingly of him as a mere boy, who scarce knew his own mind. If I ever loved any man, he would be quite sacred to me. I could not think a disrespectful thought of him—it would hurt myself." She rested her clasped hands on her knee as she spoke, and looked away across the waters with an expression of serene thoughtfulness that greatly impressed her hearer.

"The man *you* love, Claude, will be supremely fortunate," said Brandon.

"I hope so, Ralph—but I do not want to love any one. I cannot be happier than I am. Let well alone."

"Not while there is a better still," said Brandon with animation, and rising from his reclining position, he picked up her hat and hung it on a branchlet near them. Taking the place on the log beside her,

he continued. "Do you mean to say that you have any romantic intention of renouncing matrimony?"

"No, if marriage *is* happy, like Aunt Selby's, it is better than living alone, but then one must find exactly the right person—which cannot be easy."

"You have found no suitable party as yet?" asked Brandon, smiling, as he gazed intently on the quaint gracefulness of her dainty figure, the serious sweetness of her thoughtful eyes.

"I have not sought diligently," she returned, laughing, "I imagine such 'parties' steal upon one like a thief in the night."

"They do, my sweet ward. This is a subject of great interest to me, and moreover I am personally responsible in the matter, at any rate for the next year. If your choice does not please me I can forbid the banns," said Brandon. "Believe me, I shall exercise my right, I will maintain the last shred of my authority. I never knew I loved power till now."

"I do not think I shall trouble you," said Claude dreamily. There was a short pause, during which Brandon cut the heads off some long grasses with his stick, then suddenly turning to her, he began a sentence with "Listen to me, Claude——" Something in his voice struck her as unusual, as less calm and measured than it generally sounded. She looked at him with a startled expression, when a gay "halloo" upon the right made both look in the direction from whence it came, and there below them, having just come round a projecting spur of rock, were two horsemen, whom they quickly recognised to be Sir Philip Brandon and O'Hara.

"This is the height of luck," said the latter. "Sir

Phil and I have been wandering about like a new edition of the Babes in the Wood. I thought we had hit on a short cut, and instead of that we have lost our way. The natives don't seem to know their own language, and after wandering God knows where, we got on a cart track that brought us down to the beach a couple of hundred yards higher up."

"It's all O'Hara's fault," added Sir Philip. "He is so cocksure he can find his way blindfold about any country, especially the one he is in, wherever it may be."

"Your great deficiency, my dear boy, is want of imagination. You may have a genius for getting into scrapes, but you do not see your way out of them. Now we have found Miss Tracey to be our angel guide, we are all right."

"I think you can ride along the sands till you get to the village, where you will find the road," said Claude.

"What do you think of the Featherstone horses?" asked Brandon, whose brows had contracted with annoyance at the sight of the unexpected intruders on his delightful *solitude à deux*, whereupon O'Hara plunged into a "horsey" disquisition, which was Greek to Claude.

"I think it is time to be going homewards," she said presently, "or we shall be late for dinner. How tired and dusty your horses look."

"They haven't done so much, after all, but it's a sultry day. If you are going home, we shall have the pleasure of your company. I see there's a path running just above the sands."

"Yes, but it will not do for horses."

They all started together, Claude and Sir Philip in front. Sir Philip was less lively than usual. In the course of their intermittent conversation he gave expression to some very gloomy opinions, and on overhearing some chance allusion to Colonel Clavering, confided to Claude his conviction that Clavering was an ill-tempered, sulky brute. In short, he (Sir Philip) could not understand what Miss Selby could see to like in the fellow.

"But she does *not* like him," said Claude.

"Then why does she let him bore her to the exclusion of every one else?"

"Because she can't help it. No one interferes with him, and Kate is not a sort of girl to do rude things. Besides, why should she worry about any one? In another week or so we shall be away, and probably never see any of you any more, except indeed Mr. Brandon, poor man! he cannot easily shake himself clear of me."

"Do you think he wants to get clear of you?" asked Sir Philip, with some significance, adding without a pause, "Perhaps Clavering will not let you lose sight of him. The transit from Thirlstane Manor to London is by no means long or difficult."

"I don't think Colonel Clavering can be so mistaken as to think it advisable to undertake it, easy as it is, on our account," said Claude carelessly.

Sir Philip glanced sharply at her, and thought for a moment, then his face cleared, and he soon began to talk nearly in his natural genial way, with here and there a dash of bitterness.

On his side, O'Hara carried on the conversation with very little assistance from Brandon: the elo-

quence of both cavaliers being much interrupted by the varying distance between them and the pedestrians caused by the sinuosities of the path followed by the latter.

"Don't hurry," said O'Hara, when Brandon was at one time almost on a level with him, and Claude was some way ahead. "Sir Philip can amuse her as well as you, ay, and better, faith! He's lighter in hand a good deal than a solemn chap like you, and he has a wheedling tongue of his own. You give him fair play, Brandon, my boy. Why wouldn't you do a double stroke of kindness?—give your sweet little ward a right good husband, for, in spite of his having taken the bit in his teeth for a while, Sir Philip is a deuced pleasant fellow to live with, and a good fellow to boot! *Per contra*, clear your cousin's estate, and let him live happily ever after."

"Pray, why should I shower blessings on Sir Philip Brandon's head?"—discontentedly—"he has never brought any particular blessing to me. I don't fancy he is the kind of man to suit Miss Tracey."

"Lord help you. He's the sort of man to suit any woman. Why, he gets on like a house on fire with her."

"Pray, O'Hara, have the goodness to leave Miss Tracey's matrimonial prospects alone. She need be in no hurry. For a year I have full power over her and her property. I am not going to be easily pleased, I assure you. I am not aware of any right you have to offer advice on the subject."

"Oh, well, if you are going to ride the high horse and come 'the 'igh and 'aughty,' as your countrymen say, over me, why I am done—only I thought as a

friend I might suggest a few common-sense ideas that might not occur to *you* of their own accord."

"You are very good," said Brandon stiffly.

This brought them to the village, a very small one, on a projecting tongue of land, with an array of fishing-boats drawn up on the beach, and a rugged little pier.

A few hundred yards beyond the last house landwards, the road bifurcated, the branch on the right leading to Middlethorpe Castle, the great place of the district, and as the quartette reached this point, Lady Elmslie's carriage drove up and stopped at her command.

"What in the world are you all doing here?" she cried. "How did you find your way here, Sir Philip?"

"Faith, Lady Elmslie," put in O'Hara, "we *lost* our way here. We have been exploring the country for two hours longer than was necessary, and only found one native who could speak the language."

"How in the world could they have managed it?" asked Lady Elmslie, turning to Kate, who sat beside her. "But I can't stop for explanations now. It is late, and I expect the Rector and Colonel Clavering in to dinner. Come, Claude, Mr. Brandon, you had better get in, you will be dreadfully hurried if you walk up to the Hall."

Claude and her escort obeyed, and the carriage rolled on.

"I wonder what's wrong with Brandon; he was as cross as a bear with a sore head, when I spoke a few pleasant words," said O'Hara as they walked their horses up the hill.

"You see, O'Hara, you have a deuced bad habit

of treading on people's corns, when you think you are doing the agreeable, and Ralph looked a trifle out of temper."

"A trifle! He was in the devil's own temper. I say, Brandon, my boy, do you think your saturnine kinsman has an eye to the little heiress himself?"

"Nonsense. Ralph is not a marrying man; besides, it doesn't seem to have got out yet, but he has got the bulk of the property already. It's a dead secret, O'Hara, remember. Lady Elmslie let it out to me, when we were talking about Miss Tracey. She said that Ralph has some grand quixotic intentions towards his ward. But you wouldn't have a fellow marry on good intentions?"

"Not on the best that ever paved hell," cried O'Hara emphatically.

"Fancy making such a mistake——" began Sir Philip.

"Ay, I can fancy you making it, well enough," broke in O'Hara. "It's just like you to make yourself ridiculous with your attentions to a girl, the minute you begin to doubt whether she has a penny or not. You know you are enough to vex a saint, Philip Brandon. Take my advice, cut and run after the first couple of days' shooting. You'd better head back to the Continent, and keep out of harm's way. You are not enjoying yourself a bit—so come."

"No, I won't," interrupted Sir Philip, in his turn. "What! leave a walk-over to that brute, Clavering? Why, he might even bully Miss Selby into marrying him."

"No bad thing for her, either. The Thirlstane property is a right good one, and as to his being a

brute, she'd manage him and no mistake. She'd manage any one, the dark-eyed darlin'! If I were only a few years younger, I'd go in for her myself, faith, I would."

"Don't be an ass, O'Hara," said Sir Philip loftily. "I would rather risk ruin and marry her, than let her fall into Clavering's hands. I don't think she likes him a bit, and I am not going to let him have it as his own way in future."

"Ah, there you go. Once you enter the lists against another man, it's all up. You'll pledge yourself beyond recall, and have nothing but a life of screwing before you."

"Better screw in pleasant company than roll on golden wheels with a bore. There, say no more, O'Hara, you are growing a nuisance. Let us push on, or we will not have many minutes to adorn," and he pressed his horse into a trot, leaving O'Hara rather moody and following at a slower pace.

CHAPTER XIX.

"A BOLD STROKE."

THE twelfth was hopelessly wet, and the men came back to afternoon tea, not a little disgusted, glad to get off their dripping garments and sit down in the pleasant drawing-room, where a good fire tempered the damp and gloom of the evening, and a daintily-spread tea-table offered welcome refreshment.

Over this Kate Selby presided, looking an ideal country nymph in a suitable garment of thin grey

tweed braided with black, which showed the graceful lines of her figure as she poured out the tea, and distributed hot scones and bread and butter with diligence.

"Where is Mr. Brandon?" asked Lady Elmslie.

"Oh, he pushed on with one of the keepers, to the further side of the moor. He said he wanted to fill his bag, so we parted company," replied Sir Philip.

"If he went round by Scarsdale, he will not be in till late," said Lady Elmslie. "He is very foolish."

"You see, Brandon is one of these desperately persevering fellows that can't give in," remarked O'Hara. "Another cup, Miss Selby, if I may venture to interfere with your attentions to the 'boy,'" he continued, for Kate had taken young Langley's tea and cake to where he sat near the fire, looking rather white and shivering.

"I will attend to you in a moment, but I am quite sure Jack has taken a severe chill. He ought to go to bed, Lady Elmslie."

"There isn't a thing the matter with me," began Jack indignantly. "I stumbled over a big root of heather, and pitched into a nasty water hole, which made me feel a bit queer for a minute, but I am all right now, only—" here a furious sneeze stopped his eloquence, and he covered his face with his handkerchief.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Jack, forcing truth to assert herself in this way," cried Kate.

"A little hot brandy and water (but screeching hot, mind!) would be the best cure," suggested O'Hara gravely.

"Yes, go along and ask the housekeeper for it," said Sir Philip. "Then turn in and have a snooze, and by dinner-time you'll be a new boy."

"Thank you, I would rather stay where I am," returned the youngster resentfully.

"I don't blame him," growled Clavering in a significant tone. "Perhaps you would bestow a cup on your petitioner when you have sufficiently attended to that youth."

"Captain O'Hara comes first," returned Kate with a stern air of justice.

"Ah, right you are, Miss Selby," and Kate went back to her tea-table.

"We are going to shoot over my territory the day after to-morrow," said Colonel Clavering, coming over cup in hand, to sit on a long settle beside Kate, who had taken up a piece of fancy work, after having done her duty. "We expect to be near Birkmere about one o'clock; suppose you and Miss Tracey and Lady Elmslie join us there. It's a picturesque spot, and you can drive nearly the whole way. It will be something new to you, perhaps?"

"It would be quite delightful," cried Kate, casting a distractingly grateful glance up into the rugged face bent admiringly towards her, and perceiving that, while apparently occupied by Lady Elmslie, Sir Philip was listening with all his ears. "But I heard Lady Elmslie saying something to Claude about driving over to Middleborough on Thursday."

"What on earth do they want in such a hole as Middleborough?"

"Oh, to match some wools."

"Well, they can go if they like. You come over to

lunch with us; my mother will do chaperon. She has a niece staying with her, a girl from Devonshire, so you won't feel alone among the barbarians."

"Thank you; how nice and thoughtful you are," said Kate, smiling sweetly. "I will speak to Lady Elmslie, perhaps she would like to come."

"Oh, she can please herself. I don't think she cares for scrambling about, or Miss Tracey either. They haven't your spirit or go."

"Well, I'm sure there is no lack of spirit in Lady Elmslie, and my cousin loves fine scenery with all her heart, doesn't she, Sir Philip?" (He had wandered over to their immediate vicinity.)

"I do not exactly know what or who I am expected to answer for."

"Isn't Claude fond of beautiful scenery?"

"Yes, of course. Like to like: she must be fond of charming things."

"Charmingly said. You ought to hear that, Claude."

"Don't be cruel. Don't you see Grantley is indulging her in some of his reminiscences of European celebrities, when society worthy of the name existed?" cried O'Hara, pointing the top of his spoon towards the comfortable corner where Claude sat listening to Mr. Grantley, with whom she was a great favourite.

"Well, Clavering, I don't wish to contradict too flatly, but I don't think the ladies would care to sit on the damp grass for the pleasure of our society. Why, the ground won't be dry for a week."

"Do you suppose I should ask them to do anything of the kind?" said Clavering impatiently. "Why, there is the most picturesque of huts replete

with every comfort, where we shall lunch, and as we shall have had enough sport by that time, I'll show you some curious rocks, the blue Birkstanes, Miss Selby; and hadn't you all better dine with me after?"

"Well, for my part, I think it's a mistake troubling ladies to come out to lunch, when one can never be sure of the weather," said Sir Philip, in a sulky tone.

"Never mind, Colonel Clavering. Sir Philip evidently considers woman in the way. I suppose *you* are not so intense a sportsman? *You* don't think it such a bore to speak to a lady in the intervals of killing?"

"That depends on who the lady is," put in Sir Philip. "I suspect the general run of ladies would find scant courtesy at Clavering's hands when birds are in question."

"You have no right to say that," returned Clavering, testily.

"What are you quarrelling about?" asked Lady Elmslie, rising from her seat in the ingle nook where she had been talking in a low tone with the Rector, and coming over to the tea-table.

"Colonel Clavering is inviting us to lunch with the 'guns' on Thursday, when they are going to shoot over Birkfell."

"We shall have lunch at the Mere, and, if fine, it might be a pleasant expedition for you," said Clavering.

"Very pleasant indeed, but I *must* go in to Middleborough. However, Miss Tracey and Miss Selby can go if they choose."

"My mother often joins us if she has a friend stay-

ing with her, so, granted fine weather, we shall consider the matter settled," and he gave a self-satisfied little nod to Sir Philip.

"Come along, have a game of billiards till the bell rings," said O'Hara, "though, faith, I am half afraid to play with you, luck seems on your side this evening."

"Think so?" ejaculated Clavering, his eyes lighting up with a triumphant gleam. "Then I'll make hay while the sun shines," and clapping O'Hara on the back, followed him out of the room. A short silence ensued, then the vicar addressed some remarks about a tithe disturbance in a neighbouring parish to Mr. Grantley, from which a rather heated argument sprang up. Under cover of this, Sir Philip, who had been standing behind the shelter of an outspread *Times*, approached Kate, who had risen from the tea-table and gone to take a look at the driving mist which was sweeping across the bay.

"I thought you and I were to be chums." he said in a low voice; "I did not think you'd take sides against me with that beetle-browed fellow, Clavering, —a stranger too, by Jove." He spoke in a tone half-jest, half earnest, which is somewhat difficult to answer without putting oneself in the wrong, and he placed himself so as to cut off Kate's retreat.

"Yes, of course I took sides with Colonel Clavering," she returned with a saucy laugh. "He made very pleasant suggestions—and you were rude. You did not want me—I mean any of us—and Colonel Clavering did, so he is evidently a man of superior enlightenment and taste."

"Oh, for that matter, any one can see he wanted *you*, and no one else. Perhaps you would not object to a *tête-à-tête*?" cried Sir Philip with a sneer.

"No, not the least," said Kate airily. "He is not a lively companion, but I could do the talking, and when he fell asleep I could stroll about and look at the scenery."

"Fall asleep, when *tête-à-tête* with *you*," said Sir Philip with an expressive look, "not he, nor any man even at the ripe age of a hundred and fifty."

"A hundred and fifty! Why, such a companion would make me open my eyes, if he had a good memory, and was inclined to unlock his stores of scandal."

"Well, you must know you have been unkind and unfriendly to no common degree—confess it."

"Why should I? You have been cross and unsympathetic and disagreeable, and everything you ought not to be, and it is because poor Colonel Clavering has been just the reverse, and took pity on a poor, lonely, shy, little stranger, that I like him so much;" and she contrived to utter "so much" with a delicious smile and lingering sweetness, almost tantamount to an avowal of love. Sir Philip looked earnestly at her with an air of amusement not untinged with annoyance. "A lonely, shy, little stranger," he repeated; "the description doesn't fit Kate."

"Kate,"—innocently—"who is Kate?"

"I beg you ten thousand pardons," exclaimed Sir Philip, his face flushing deep red, and assuming a real unmistakable look of distress. "I—I am so accustomed to hear Miss Tracey call you by your name, and you are so constantly in my thoughts that——"

"There, never mind," she exclaimed, her native good nature breaking through her equally natural love of teasing. "Never do it again, and you shall have plenary absolution."

"I shall promise no such thing," exclaimed Sir hilip, who was beginning to lose his head.

"Oh, you must," she said, low and emphatically, recognising the mischief she was working. 'Pray let me pass—I want to see if Captain O'Hara winning."

"You mean Clavering."

"Well, both. Come, Claude, come and see how ie game is going." And both girls, followed at some ttle distance by Sir Philip, made their way to the lliard-room.

"Why are you so disagreeable to poor Sir Philip andon?" asked Claude an hour later, when they id gone to dress.

"Because it is my duty," returned Kate, flushing as she began to take off her gown with unnecesry haste. "His dear friend, Captain O'Hara, has en at some pains to warn me that he is not to mmit himself in any way to a penniless lass, without even a long pedigree.' He may trust me to iard the guileless victim from his own weakness, I sure you, Claude. Sir Philip ought to be able to ke care of himself: I'm sure I don't want him to crifice his chances of an heiress on my shrine. hy doesn't he marry Lady Elmslie? I don't think *e* would have any objection," and, to Claude's finite amazement, Kate suddenly kicked away her vourite gown, and throwing herself into a chair, irst out crying.

"Why, Katie dear, what is the matter. Don't you el well?"

"No, not at all," sobbed Kate. "It has been ch a miserable day, and every one was tiresome.

You were so dull, you never spoke a word the live-long day, and——"—sobs.

"Was *I* so stupid. I was quite unconcious of it dear Kate," exclaimed Claude penitently. "I am afraid I am selfish sometimes."

"I don't want to stay here," continued Kate impetuously. "I am sure Dad doesn't enjoy his fishing without me. Let us write to mother and say we will go to them next week."

"Very well—only Lady Elmslie expected us to stay to the end of the month."

"Lady Elmslie shall not have everything her own way. *I* shall go, whatever you decide on."

"Why, Kate, you are not one bit like yourself," cried Claude, fairly bewildered. "You must tell me what has really gone wrong when we come up to bed—there is no time now, you must get your eyes right before we go down to dinner."

At these words, Kate started up and ran to examine herself in the glass.

"I am a perfect fright and a dreadful fool. How thankful I am Janet is not here. You are the safest little soul in the world. Just forget all about my nonsense. I have a twinge of neuralgia in my head and a screw loose in my temper. Give me a kiss. Now I am all right, I must get myself up effectively and tease every one all round—*that* will be some comfort."

Need it be added that Miss Selby carried out her programme successfully, and the after-dinner interval was all the livelier in consequence.

Brandon was late for dinner, that is, he arrived with the fish, and urged in excuse the fact of his

having made a large bag. As his absence had caused some disarrangement in placing the *convives*, Brandon sat next to Lady Elmslie, who was more than usually brilliant, nor had he a word with Claude until towards the end of the evening.

In the drawing-room, Kate Selby and O'Hara organised a round game at which she and Clavering set up a joint bank, and seemed quite absorbed in each other. Sir Philip bestowed all his attention and interest on Claude, who, in Brandon's opinion, seemed to accept both very willingly.

"I have felt quite out in the cold," said Brandon when they were saying good-night. "You have not deigned to bestow a word upon me this evening."

"Nor you on me," returned Claude, laughing good-humouredly.

"I think my cousin Philip seems to have usurped my rights and duties."

"Oh, he has only constituted himself your *locum tenens* in your absence."

"But without my consent. I found a letter from your uncle when I came in. I will show it to you to-morrow. We are off at a very early hour for a distant part of the country, but we can talk it over later. How wonderfully bright Miss Selby is looking. It is all up with Clavering, I fancy. Tell her, as she is strong, to be merciful. I wonder if anything would turn you into a coquette?"

"If I had Kate's opportunities, I might be one."

Brandon shook his head; "I think the weather is going to improve," he said, "if so, we shall have a pleasant day on Thursday. You are going to join us at luncheon, I hear?"

Claude smiled, nodded and disappeared.

"It is time I turned the current of affairs into a different channel," though Lady Elmslie. "Does Ralph Brandon know where he is drifting, or is he directing his own course? I shall soon find out, and he shall discover that his destiny is not exactly in his own hands."

* * * * *

Thursday, as Brandon had anticipated, rose bright and clear, with just a crisp touch in the air which gave a delightful sense of healthful vigour.

Unfortunately, either from the damp, or a draught, or some of those mysterious sources of cold, which are rarely revealed, Lady Elmslie had taken a chill; she had a severe headache, and was extremely feverish. As she did not appear at breakfast, Claude went up to see her.

"I feel so ashamed of myself," she said with a sweet smile, when she had described her suffering from bad dreams and nervous terrors during the night, "to be disabled on this particular day. I wanted to go with you all to lunch with Colonel Clavering—now I must stay and shiver at home, and I have a senseless dislike to being left alone."

"Then do let me stay with you, dear Lady Elmslie," cried Claude eagerly. "I do not care the least about going to this luncheon. Kate has only to start a little earlier and join Mrs. Clavering at the Manor House. I will gladly stay with you."

"My dear girl, I cannot allow such a sacrifice. Sir Philip would never forgive me."

"That does not matter much." A few more *pourparlers*, and Claude won her point.

This pleasant lady's chamber looked out over the park and the bay, and had an oriel window, large enough to contain a couch, a small work table and a low easy-chair. In this cosy nook Claude found her hostess reclining after luncheon, covered with an Indian shawl, and in the act of drinking some black coffee.

"This is the best cure for a headache, dear Claude," said Lady Elmslie. "I mean a temporary cure. The only ill my 'flesh seems heir to' is neuralgia—the least cold brings it on. I think I must go to Algeria or Egypt this winter, just for a spell of warmth."

"Yes, you ought. Neuralgia is so dreadful. But you are looking better, dear Lady Elmslie, since you got up."

"Oh, I feel better. I wish, Claude, you would do a little of my crazy patchwork, you work so beautifully. I like to have some needlework on hand, but it goes on so slowly. I could not bear reading aloud, so let us talk or be silent, as the spirit moves us."

"By all means," returned Claude, taking up a gorgeous mass of patches, which lay in a heap at Lady Elmslie's feet, and sought out needle and silk, while her ladyship's maid removed the coffee-cup and some untasted toast.

A few minutes of silence ensued, a faint slumbrous murmur from the waves as they stole higher and higher up the beach making the quiet, even more soothing as the sweet fresh air brought the sound through an open window in another part of the room.

"What a nice tranquil little creature you are, Claude," said Lady Elmslie at length. "You would make a charming model for a statuette of 'Rest,' or 'Repose.' It soothes me to look at you."

"I am glad I am pleasant to you," returned Claude, smiling, as she hunted for another shade of silk.

"It is quite a gift," continued Lady Elmslie, as if to herself. "I do not wonder that poor Philip Brandon finds you so attractive. He is rather wild and excitable himself. What influence you would have over him!"

"It surprises me that you, who have seen so much, who know so much, should fancy Sir Philip Brandon cares for me, or enjoys being with me! For once, I know better than you, Lady Elmslie."

"Conceited child! Believe me, I am right. Do you know, I am fond of Sir Philip? There is a frank generosity, an indescribable manliness about him, that attracts me."

"Yes, I like him too, very much. He is very nice to me, really kind, especially when he is not pretending to make love; *then* he is only funny."

"Really, Claude, you astonish me. Pray how do you know he is only pretending?"

"I cannot explain, but I *know*," persisted Claude, who was quite determined not to give her real reason.

"I must say I do not agree with you. Sir Philip is variable in his moods and action, because he feels your guardian would not approve your marrying his cousin."

"Mr. Brandon need not fear such a denouement," said Claude very calmly.

Lady Elmslie raised herself on her cushions the better to watch her companion's countenance.

"You certainly speak with conviction," she said. Then after a pause, added with a slight laugh, "You know I am one of Ralph Brandon's oldest friends. I think he trusts me."

"No doubt! He always speaks of you as if he would tell you anything."

"Then perhaps you will think me a traitor, if I say that his intentions towards you are most generous."

"I know they are more than generous, they are just," said Claude with quiet decision, which impressed Lady Elmslie. "We have said nothing distinctly as yet, for, of course, while under age, I have no legal existence, but I think Mr. Brandon and I are of the same mind, and will, ultimately, divide my poor father's fortune between us; this is at least what *I* understand."

"Mr. Brandon never told me so much," said Lady Elmslie thoughtfully. "I only knew that his intentions were vaguely generous. This division seems fair all round. It would be shameful to rob you of what ought to be yours; it would be rather hard on Ralph Brandon if all were taken from him, especially as he has so sound a reason for wishing to be rich."

"I suppose he has. He is very ambitious," said Claude dreamily.

Lady Elmslie watched her for a moment, a slight smile upon her lips.

"Yes, he is ambitious, but there is yet a more potent reason for his gold-hunger, one with which you and I, tender-hearted women, can sympathise

more thoroughly. I know that Ralph Brandon has for years been devotedly, passionately attached to a woman he could not marry, chiefly on account of his poverty; there were other obstacles, but they have disappeared,—your father's will has removed the last."

Claude ceased to ply her needle, and gazed at Lady Elmslie, first with an expression of great amazement, which was gradually replaced by a guarded look.

"You seem astonished, Claude."

"I am," resuming her work. "I do not know why I should think so, but I never imagined Mr. Brandon could be in love, or troubled, cast down, delighted about any woman, like other men, younger men."

"Which shows how little you know your guardian," returned Lady Elmslie. "He was, and is, quite a pattern lover, only a little too jealous."

"And has it been a long attachment?"

"Oh, yes, for years."

"Do you know the lady?"

"I have seen her."

"He must have been very unhappy," murmured Claude, thoughtfully, "yet I am surprised."

She stopped abruptly. Lady Elmslie waited for a moment, hoping she would continue, but she seemed lost in thought.

"Still surprised?" added Lady Elmslie.

"Yes, I am greatly disappointed," returned Claude in a tone which somehow struck her interlocutor as indicating a deeper source of surprise than what moved her originally.

"Then why does not Mr. Brandon marry?" resumed Claude. "He can now; he should make haste

and be happy, for I suppose the lady he loves, loves him?"

"She does indeed," exclaimed Lady Elmslie warmly. Then she paused and thought rapidly. "I cannot quite make out how she really takes it. Shall I risk my last card? I think she would be loyal to a promise? If I could only be sure it would never come to his ears. Yes, I will venture.

"There is yet a small complication," she said aloud, "and I think it due to you, Claude, to mention it, *if* you will promise never to let any one know."

"You may trust me," said Claude.

"I am sure I may. I have gathered from sentences dropped here and there by Ralph Brandon—he has not absolutely told me—I have gathered that your father wished very much to marry you to Mr. Brandon, and somehow the plan could not be arranged. I can see that he feels it is, in a way, obligatory on him to carry out your father's will, if acceptable to you, so——"

"He must have a wonderful sense of obligation to my father, if it induces him to break faith with a woman who has loved him for years," interrupted Claude with a slight smile. "Why, Mr. Brandon must be indeed fallen from his original state, if he hesitates in such a case. I wish, dear Lady Elmslie, as you are on such intimate terms with Mr. Brandon, you would tell him he is perfectly free. I don't see why I should sacrifice myself in order to obtain part possession of my poor father's fortune. I prefer the half unencumbered. Will you tell him so?"

"My dear Claude, I would not venture to open the subject to him. I regret having said so much to you,

pray do not make any change in your manner. Some day you will show Ralph he is free, by marrying—marrying a man who loves you."

"Perhaps I may, perhaps I may not," returned Claude with much composure. "But it is rather an indefinite condition for poor Mr. Brandon and his lady-love to wait for. I am sure he is much too sensible to let himself be hampered by such imaginary difficulties. He may perhaps wish to have everything clearly and finally settled, and to be free from the charge of my affairs before he settled his own, but that only entails waiting a year. Next August I shall be twenty-one. I am sure he need not wait for that."

"Have I been wasting my ingenuity?" thought Lady Elmslie as she gazed at the quiet little face bent over the bright coloured work. "I have found out very little for my pains, but, however it may be with her, Ralph is touched, certainly touched, and if no alternative be applied, the poison may work into his soul."

"Well, my dear Claude, I don't suppose you or I can do much to change Ralph Brandon's views or actions, but I am sure it is better you should know the little under-current which is working the results of which you do not dream, and which makes a fair division of your father's wealth of such importance to a man we both esteem, whose path has hitherto been a thorny one."

"You are right, Lady Elmslie, and I am very much obliged to you. It is better to know the truth always."

"Her gratitude is not very enthusiastic," thought

Lady Elmslie, who added aloud, "I feel so much better for this quiet hour with you. I think I could bear some reading, but you will promise me not to be offended if I drop off to sleep."

"Certainly I will not. What shall I read?"

"There is an article in the last *Fortnightly* I want to hear; bring it to me, and I will show you. If I *do* drop off to sleep, pray go and take a walk; you must want a little fresh air."

CHAPTER XX.

"IN THE DEPTHS."

As she anticipated, Lady Elmslie soon succumbed to the soothing sound of Claude's voice. Indeed her young lectrice read in a monotonous manner unlike her usual style. Once or twice she looked up, and at length seeing her hostess seemed sound asleep, her head fallen gracefully and slightly to one side upon her cushions, she rose, laid down her book, and slipped noiselessly out of the room.

Taking her large shady hat, she went away swiftly across the sunny garden, and through the ivy-crowned door, into the cool shady woodland behind. Here she followed a narrow track through the wide-spreading bracken, till she reached a specially secluded spot, where in the middle of a small clearing stood an aged thorn tree, the twisted roots of which in places rose quite above the ground and formed not uncomfortable resting places.

In one of these, Claude settled herself, removing

her hat as if in hopes of catching some breath of air to cool her brow, but the place was too sheltered, too profoundly still to afford her this relief. And relief it would have been, for her eyes and brow ached with a strained, feverish, weary pain, which oppressed her, even while she was but partially conscious of it, so eager, so intense was her desire to think out the problem suggested by Lady Elmslie.

A whole volume of undreamed-of probabilities, motives, results, unrolled themselves before her, as she recalled the extraordinary revelations to which she had just listened. But why should she consider them extraordinary? Ralph Brandon must be fourteen or fifteen years older than herself. He might have, and probably had, gone through a whole life history before she had gone into long frocks. That he had gone through the searching fire of a serious love affair or two was possible, though to her mind by no means probable, seeing what a grave, composed, self-contained man he was. But what was this appalling sense of desolation, yea, the abomination of desolation, which had seized her soul, even overwhelmed it, as the suffocating deluge of destroying ashes blotted out the sunny life of Pompeii?

Was it possible that Brandon, her kind, thoughtful guardian, had so entwined himself with her life, that to let him go, to see his duty, his interest, his heart given to another and lost to her for ever, was like a death-sentence pressing out vitality from her soul, even before its execution. What a fool's paradise she had lived in. Now she saw with painful clearness why life had of late been so lovely, so sweet. While Brandon was with her, every need of her heart and

mind was amply satisfied, content; when he was away, there was "a sober certainty of waking bliss" —the certainty that he would come again soon, that in his absence he was thinking of her, acting for her, from a sense of duty, 'tis true, but of welcome sympathetic duty—the delightful certainty that they would never be long apart, that in a way she belonged to him and he to her; and she had not known that this deep quiet liking which never made her cheek flush nor her pulses throb, which had silently developed from the curious alliance they had drifted into that evening, when he had so honestly confessed he was not in love with her, and that the marriage he proposed was one of convenience, was true love. How well she remembered every step of their acquaintance, growing as it did to intimacy. Her girlish sense of triumph in having brought this experienced, self-possessed man of the world to confess his own and her father's little game, his steady partisanship, his never-failing sympathy and comprehension, her growing appreciation of his distinguished air and fine carriage, of his strong dark face, with its brief gleams of sweetness and flashes of humour. There was no one like him—none! And she never knew before how passionately she loved him. There was nothing to disturb their relations, nothing to rouse her from her delicious dream —a dream the duration of which she never questioned. Yet all this time he was simply waiting, wearying for another. That when heart-free, he had made up his mind to marry her, to make her happy and love her as much as he could, in return for the moneyed ease she would bring him, was a mistake, but by no means an unpardonable one, especially as it was frankly con-

fessed; but that, with his whole affection given to another woman, he was ready to bestow his counterfeit coin on herself, was a case of moral swindling which lowered him fathoms deep in her estimation, and she racked her young heart with that most cruel of life's experiences, the revelation of cherished tawdry unreality.

In the agony of accepting this proof of Brandon's unworthiness, she stretched out her small firm hands and unconsciously tore the short mossy grass at either side of her resting-place, and scattered it with nervous force among the neighbouring ferns. If—if only Lady Elmslie had spared that revelation—but how could she help doing so if she told the story at all? Then came the ever-recurring question, who could Brandon's love be? True, he knew heaps of people Claude did not, still—— Why, was not Lady Elmslie herself an old and dear friend? Was she not lovely and lovable, clever, refined, a great lady. Must he not have been all-powerful with her to induce her to visit so insignificant a child as herself, Claude?

Then Lady Elmslie had said there had been obstacles—obstacles other than money, and Lord Elmslie was alive then. Perhaps, indeed, Brandon was hopeless of ever winning his real love, when he thought of making a home with herself, and so *she* was to have been sacrificed to the necessities of his everyday life! What a self-deceived fool she had been. Only a couple of days ago she had wandered with him in such serene, profound content as seemed too sweet for earth, and he too had worn an air of happiness, of tender sympathy, that made every look from his

dark thoughtful eyes a caress. Could it be all gone, vanished for ever! It was an agony she must bear alone, an agony she could never breathe to mortal, not even to Katie, above all, not to Lady Elmslie. Oh! was *she* the object of Brandon's attachment? It was probable, but she could not be sure: of one thing she was convinced, Lady Elmslie must have seen some cause for confiding the story of Brandon's old attachment to her. Had she betrayed her own weakness so much that Lady Elmslie should think it expedient to read her such a lesson?

Now she must be true to herself, she must be strong, she must slowly and imperceptibly raise up a barrier between herself and Brandon, she must gradually change the close, confidential intimacy which had grown up between them, into more formal and distant lines, and this without any abruptness, anything to challenge observation or inquiry. Then —then—— Oh, how could she look forward, what had she to hope?

Only to hide her wounds, to shelter herself from contemptuous pity, behind a mask of quiet composure, and look for compensation—where? oh, where?

She rose, put on her hat, and strolled slowly back. She would be equal to the task she had set herself, she knew that, but (it was very unreasonable), a curious distrust and dislike to Lady Elmslie had sprung up in her heart. It was positively ridiculous, but it was true all the same.

Why should Lady Elmslie warn her, if she fancied she (Claude) were drifting into too warm an affection for her guardian? So Claude reasoned with her-

self, as she walked slowly and half unconsciously towards the house. It was, no doubt, well meant, perhaps wise to rouse her from her delightful dreams. Why should not Brandon love Lady Elmslie. She was the kind of woman he ought to marry. Claude felt she had no right to quarrel with either on that score; on her own head lay the shame, the humiliation, of giving her heart where it was not sought; she alone was responsible for the bitterness of the present moment. All might be borne and got over, if she could forget that, when his whole heart was another's, Brandon had mocked her with an offer of marriage, for mere Mammon's sake. However, she would try to be just and reasonable: her business was with herself, to master and mask her own weakness, to regain real composure of spirit, to forget as soon as possible. Should she ever again know the tranquil happiness of the last few months? No, certainly not, if she allowed herself to dwell morbidly on this cruel awakening. With sudden resolution, she paused, looked round on the trees, the yellowing bracken, the mossy stones, which two or three days before had seemed so lovely to her happy eyes, then in her own mind she wrote "finis" at the end of her life's first chapter, and with a brisker, steadier step, walked back.

* * * * *

The sportsmen were rather late; even Kate and Mr. Grantley hardly gave themselves time to dress.

"I am so sorry you could not come," cried Kate, as she ran into her cousin's room, where Claude sat ready for dinner, and reading. "Oh, I do wish you had been with us, Claude; we had a lovely time; such

a charming spot to lunch in, and a most obliging man from I don't know where arrived at the Manor. So Colonel Clavering was obliged to stay at home for dinner. The new young lady is rather pretty, but such a funny timid little creature. She stopped her ears, and cried out when the men fired. Sir Philip was quite devoted to her. I managed very well with the boy, the beau, and Captain O'Hara, who is really a dear! and *so* amusing. How is Lady Elmslie?"

"Much better. She will come down this evening, but we must dine without her."

"Have you been indoors all this lovely day?"

"No, I had a delightful walk while Lady Elmslie slept."

"You certainly do not look like à *garde malade*, you have quite a pretty colour, more than usual. What an improvement colour is. I am looking pale and tired and ugly. Oh, I must make haste and dress."

When Lady Elmslie joined her guests in the evening, she had a charming air of languor. She answered all inquiries with infinite sweetness, then she conversed for some time, apart, with Brandon, while Claude continued her vicarious patch-work and listened to Sir Philip, who indulged himself by abusing the shooting party and the luncheon, and complained covertly of Kate's heartless coquetry.

Lady Elmslie's attention having been claimed by one of the other guests, Brandon—after watching his ward for some moments in silence—came over to where she sat, and asked, "Am I disturbing a council of peace or war?"

"Well, both," replied Sir Philip. "We will finish

the discussion another time, Miss Tracey," and he strolled away to the piano.

"You seem to have struck up a friendship with my cousin of late," said Brandon, looking searchingly into her eyes. It was the first time they had spoken together, since Claude had gone down into the depths that morning. Her heart beat fast, and her cheeks flamed for a moment, and then grew white. "Can she care about that thoughtless, empty-headed fellow?" Brandon asked himself; then, as she did not answer, he continued aloud; "Have you caught a headache or any other ill from Lady Elmslie, for you are not yourself?"

"I am quite well."

"I doubt it. Ride with me to-morrow, a nice long wandering ride at a foot pace. It will then put you right. Will you come, Claude?"

Claude paused. Yesterday how gladly she would have gone. She must not show to sudden a change.

"If Lady Elmslie does not want me, I shall be very pleased to go, and—Kate and I think we ought to leave soon to join my aunt and uncle before they leave Wales."

"I thought you were to stay a month."

"We have been here nearly three weeks."

"Still—however, do as you like—only—you surprise me."

"You have known Lady Elmslie a long time?" asked Claude suddenly.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I scarcely know. But——Kate wants me to play for her," and dropping her work, Claude left him.

Brandon sat very silently in the smoking-room,

while the others laughed and talked and told good stories.

He could not get Claude's expression or her sudden query about Lady Elmslie out of his head. Since the time when he had accepted old Tracey's matrimonial scheme, a whole cycle seemed to have elapsed, and all things had become new. How was it he had ever dreamed of a calm friendly union with Claude? A marriage of convenience, with Mammon for its ruling spirit, and with Claude! whose dainty delicate figure and thoughtful, spiritual, haunting eyes were perpetually before him, while the memory of the sweet soft kiss she had pressed upon his cheek, when she mistook him for her father, filled him with the tenderest longing to feel it once more—once, nay, a hundred times. From that moment, though not quite consciously, Brandon began to change from the compassionate friend to the passionate lover.

The weather was not propitious the following day: it was grey and stormy with sudden showers, so the ladies stayed and amused themselves as best they could till late in the afternoon, when the sun shone out, and permitted a walk to the Vicarage.

The following morning brought a letter from Aunt Selby, who begged them to hasten their coming, as both the Major and Janet were getting moped, and "I," she continued, "want both of you more than ever."

When the men had departed on their murderous errand, Kate and Claude opened the question of their departure the following week.

Lady Elmslie at first would not hear of it, refusing in the kindest and most flattering words. But after

some polite fencing, the cousins gained their point, as their hostess meant they should, as she ran over in her own mind sundry cogent reasons why their visit might conveniently come to an end. Finally it was settled that they should leave the following Tuesday.

"It seems like no time," exclaimed Lady Elmslie, "and there are still several places you ought to see, I must make those tiresome men spare us a day from the grouse, and we will have a picnic at Beaulin Abbey. I shall miss you awfully!"

* * * * *

Lady Elmslie was indefatigable in her efforts to amuse and interest her young guests during the remainder of their stay, winding up with the proposed picnic.

Lady Elmslie, Kate and Colonel Clavering's cousin rode, escorted by all the men except young Langley. The preparations and arrangements were perfect, as most matters organised by Lady Elmslie were—a brake being despatched at an early hour with servants and all necessaries for a good and well-served dinner.

Claude preferred driving in a light phaeton with young Langley for a charioteer, thus exciting mixed feelings in that young gentleman's breast. He liked Miss Tracey heartily, and was rather proud of being chosen by her to be her Jehu, but, on the other hand, he loved riding, and Kate Selby more.

Lady Elmslie looked supremely well on horseback. She paired off with Brandon at once, under the pretext of showing the way. At the gates of Thirlstane they were joined by Colonel Clavering and his cousin; henceforward Kate was condemned to the

company of her two admirers, and she proved herself equal to the task of playing them off with tact and skill, distributing her smiles with even-handed justice, while O'Hara undertook to escort the Devonian cousin, whom he kept in a condition of continual giggling with his stories and compliments.

The usual evolutions of such an expedition were gone through. Lady Elmslie told the story of the ruins, and an old man conducted the party into various nooks and passages, leading to points of view, and related some legends in a somewhat incomprehensible dialect. Dinner was neatly laid in what had been the refectory, one side of which had fallen and permitted a wide outlook over a beautiful country.

Every one did their best to be brilliant, Lady Elmslie and Brandon setting a good example. Then of course, even in the most sequestered show place, there was the inevitable stall, at the entrance, for the sale of photographs and specimens, over which there was a good deal of laughing, as the *convives* bought largely. Then the sunset was so beautiful, they were tempted to delay their homeward journey, till called to order by the mistress of the revels.

Through all this long day, Brandon had hardly exchanged a word with Claude. Lady Elmslie had elected him her aide-de-camp, and kept him well employed, while Claude herself was closely attended by Sir Philip, who was not particularly pleased with Kate.

Then the narrow path which led along the top of the remaining walls had to be explored, and the beautiful evening effects to be watched and admired,

till it was indeed time "to mount and ride," if they did not want the shades of night to close o'er them.

Kate and Colonel Clavering were first in the saddle, and rode off together without any regard to the others.

While Sir Philip was mounting Lady Elmslie, Brandon came up to young Langley, who was looking to the condition of the smart pair of chestnuts which drew the phaeton.

"Wouldn't you like to ride back?" he said; "if so, you can have my horse, and I will drive Miss Tracey, if she will accept my services."

"Oh, thank you, I should like to ride, if you don't mind." This to Claude.

"Not at all," she returned.

The sudden manœuvre made her heart beat. Not that she had any objection to Brandon's company; it was delightful pain to be with him, could she only forget that he proposed to marry her, while his heart was another's. Delight would predominate. Brandon felt unusually bright, even youthful; the world seemed a pleasant place, and beauty its predominant characteristic. He was going to have a virtual *tête-à-tête* with a companion whom he had grown to consider the most stimulating, yet the most tranquillising of comrades.

"I presume you are satisfied with the exchange," he said with a pleasant smile, as he gathered up the reins.

"You are growing spoiled and conceited," she returned, laughing. "However, I am quite resigned."

"Well, Claude, *you* do not spoil me," resumed Brandon, when they got clear away.

"Did you let Lady Elmslie know you were not

going to ride?" asked Claude instead of answering directly.

"Yes, of course. I said I thought young Langley would like to ride back."

There was silence for some minutes, during which Claude resented her sense of sorrow to think that never again was she to know the profound, soul-satisfying, serene content Brandon's presence used to bring her.

"Are you not cutting your visit rather short, Claude?" he said at length.

"Only by a few days. But as we gathered from my aunt's letter that they really wanted us, and Lady Elmslie has other guests coming——"

"Yes, as I know to my cost," he interrupted. "She has made me promise to stay and help her with them, otherwise I was going to ask if I could not find some little hostellerie at Llanogwen, where I might put up for a few days' fishing with Major Selby."

"I can write and let you know. They will not return to London for three or four weeks."

"Should you like me to come, Claude?"

"Yes, of course, we all should."

Brandon looked down into her eyes earnestly, eagerly, as if he would search her soul.

"Claude," he said, "what has come between you and me?"

It was a hard question to answer.

"Why, what should come between us?"

"I don't know; you must. For this curious, indefinable cloud that partially blinds me, this vague something I cannot put into words, has arisen on

your side. Why don't you trust me as you used, Claude? I deserve your trust as much as ever I did.'

She could not reply immediately. She would not speak falsely. Some day she would tell him the whole truth, now she must temporise.

"Yes," she said, "you do, you are the kindest of guardians, and *I* am an obedient ward, am I not?"

"So far, you are all I could wish, but"—another pause—"you have some secret from me, Claude," said Brandon, with one of his rare, sweet smiles that made her heart ache. How was she to reply? She must be true, though she could not tell the whole truth, so it came into her head to say with puzzling frankness, "Yes, there *is* a secret, but it will not be a long one, and when I tell you, I am not sure you will be pleased. We shall soon be all right, though at first you may be a little vexed with me."

This enigmatical speech made Brandon turn hot and cold. What could it mean, but that she had determined to accept some offer of marriage, and was doubtful how far it might be pleasing to her guardian? If so, who could it be but Philip Brandon? Yet he was certainly in love with Kate Selby. Could he (Brandon) agree to such a sacrifice? Never!

"Well, Claude, you must tell me when you like. I shall try to be reasonable for your sweet sake. Now it is a heavenly evening, we are 'far from the madding crowd,' let us cast all secrets behind us, and enjoy this delicious hour!"

CHAPTER XXI.

"A BOLT FROM THE BLUE."

In spite of Lady Elmslie's veiled reluctance to let him go, Brandon insisted on escorting his ward and Kate Selby more than half-way, where he saw them safely bestowed in the train for Bangor, the nearest station to Llanogwen. The journey would have been dull indeed but for Kate. Claude was very silent, and looked weary, and though Brandon was most careful of his companions' comfort, it was evidently an effort on his part to speak.

"You will send me a line to-morrow, will you not?" he said at parting. "It is too long a journey for you, Claude. I have not seen you look like your old pale shy self since the Lichfield Terrace days. You will be sure to tell me how you get on?"

"Of course I shall, and I am not so tired as I look."

"You will let me know if you can find quarters for me. I shall be free at the end of next week!"

"Oh! yes, Mr. Brandon. It will be delightful to have you. I had no idea you were an angler as well as everything else," cried Kate.

"Good-bye, Claude," said Brandon, leaning into the carriage, and holding her hand closely for an unnecessary minute. "I hope you will be all right to-morrow."

The clangour of a noisy bell warned him to stand

back, and in another moment the train had swept out of the station.

Arrived at their destination, the warmest of welcomes awaited them.

It was worth while travelling to find how precious their company was to those they had left behind. Claude was pale, silent and evidently very tired—Kate flushed, brilliant and apparently in the highest spirits.

The next day saw her early afoot to accompany her father in his tramp to his favourite trout stream, and their lives quickly settled into a pleasant monotony.

The Major fished, Mrs. Selby and Janet hunted for rare ferns, and selected curiously shaped stones to make a rockery in one corner of the conservatory at home. Claude and Kate assisted both.

After a while a letter from Brandon told them he was going to stay with Lady S——, that he would then join them in Wales. He also mentioned that Sir Philip Brandon was going to hunt big game with a young attaché of the Austrian Embassy, who had a castle in the Carpathians, with a territory where savage animals abounded.

Major Selby, however, had arranged a tour before returning home, which prevented their meeting Brandon till all were assembled in London later on.

* * * * *

The visit of Lady Margaret Grimstone with her attendant husband and daughter was as heavy and stilted a performance as Lady Elmslie anticipated.

Brandon did yeoman's service in the way of occupying and amusing the visitors. He and Mr. Grim-

stone settled not only the affairs of England, but for most European nations. Lady Margaret, who was strong in Sunday and charity schools, visited all those institutions within a circuit of ten miles, and made the teachers' lives a burden to them, besides stirring up the peaceful placid, rector into a very uncomfortable state of irritation and self-reproach. Altogether her ladyship enjoyed her visit extremely, and left Becksdale Hall with an exhilarating sense of her own superiority.

O'Hara had sentenced himself to exile when he knew who was coming, and departed north to the Doncaster races. Sir Philip hung on a day or two longer, looking rather dull and sulky, and only showing up at dinner-time. The day her guests had departed, Lady Elmslie was virtually alone. Her brother-in-law had a bad cold and thought it wise to keep his room. When Brandon returned from seeing Lady Margaret Grimstone and her attendants off at Thirlstane, he threw himself into a chair with something like a sigh, and meeting Lady Elmslie's eyes, burst out laughing.

"Yes," said Lady Elmslie, "isn't it a relief? You have really been a hero, Ralph, through this dreariness, 'long-drawn out.' Now you shall reap your reward. I have some pleasant people coming next; you know them, I am sure."

"You are very good, Lady Elmslie," interrupted Brandon, "but my time is up, and more than up. I must go to town to interview publishers and men of business, and then I am going down to stay a few days with Lord S——"

"The secretary for ——" she interrupted in her

turn. "Ah! Ralph, that means advancement!"

"I don't know ; I never was in the office."

"No matter, you know the world is at your feet. I wish, now that we are quiet for a moment, you would give me some advice."

They were sitting in Lady Elmslie's private morning room, where she wrote her letters and her journals, kept her favourite books, and only admitted her most intimate friends.

"My poor wits are at your service," returned Brandon.

Lady Elmslie took a key that hung to her watch-chain and opened an old-fashioned inlaid bureau, in the pigeon-holes of which account books and papers were neatly arranged, and proceeded to take out a small book.

"By the way," she said, still standing beside it, "Colonel Clavering tells me he is going to leave moor and mountains for the dusty desert of London. I suspect, however, he is *en route* to Llanogwen. I wonder which of our young friends is the attraction?"

"Have you any doubt?" asked Brandon.

"Yes. Kate is the handsomest, the most attractive, but Claude has the reputation of wealth."

"Her fortune depends on me," said Brandon coolly, "and I shall take care no sulky bear like Clavering shall have one or the other while my authority lasts."

"Then what do you intend to do with your charming little ward?" asked Lady Elmslie, looking keenly at him.

"Whatever she chooses herself."

"But she may fancy a sulky bear?"

"I don't think she will."

"Had you not better allow her to marry your cousin?"

"What! marry Philip Brandon? She would not thank me for my permission, in *that* case."

"You think so? Well I do not agree."

"What do you mean?" cried Brandon, starting up and standing opposite Lady Elmslie. "You women have sometimes a curious insight denied to men. What do you mean?"

"I mean," she said, "that Sir Philip is just the man to take a young girl's fancy, and I think if it were not for his dread of *you*, he might be Claude Tracey's *fiancé* at this moment."

"You think so—you really think so?" exclaimed Brandon, moving restlessly to the window and back. "I don't seem able to take it in. Philip is by no means a bad fellow, but quite unsuited to be Claude's husband. Yet——" He paused, puzzled and confounded by his recollection of the subtle change in Claude's manner. This was perhaps too strong an expression, though she certainly had closed the petals of her heart against him, as if at the approach of some unfriendly blast.

"I see," said Lady Elmslie smiling, "that convincing trifles array themselves in your memory."

"No, they do not," returned Brandon bluntly. "Moreover, I fancied that Sir Philip was considerably smitten with Miss Selby."

"Did you? So did I at first, but now I see which way the current really sets."

Brandon looked fixedly out of the window, seeing

nothing save a dreamy vision of Claude's quiet face, while he thought: "She may be right; women are close observers of each other."

"Then," continued Lady Elmslie taking a couple of books she had selected from the bureau and laying them on her writing table, "your interesting little ward was very confidential with me in some of our *tête-à-tête* interviews; she seems to believe you are going to be very generous to her, even to bestowing on her the half of your kingdom—I mean her father's bequest. She is very pleased at this—so pleased, that I cannot help thinking there is some deeper motive than mere love of money."

"Claude loves justice more than money; she was deeply wounded by old Tracey's will—naturally."

"Then every one knows Philip Brandon is somewhat out at elbows, so she would of course like to help him."

"Ha!" ejaculated Brandon.

"You must not think me presuming on old friendship, Ralph, if I express a hope, that you will be just—just to yourself as well as generous. What does a girl like Claude Tracey want with money?"

"What does any one want with money? The gratification of their heart's desire. If, as you seem to think, she happens to be in love with Philip, why, money will make the course of her true love run smooth." He laughed rather harshly. "But she shall wait till she is of age, to know what I intend to do. It will be a wholesome test for Philip's loyalty."

"No doubt," replied Lady Elmslie, watching him

closely. "But, knowing, as you must, how true my interest in you has always been, you will perhaps give me some idea of your intentions; you will not be quixotic?"

Brandon laughed again. "You are too good, my dear Lady Elmslie. I am much flattered by your interest, but I will not let any one know my plans or intentions, not until I declare them to the person most interested."

"No one has a right to complain of that, Ralph, but if her heart is really Sir Philip's, you would not oppose——"

"I assure you, my only wish is to see my ward well and happily married," returned Brandon in his usual, cold, self-possessed tone. "I must always remember that no one can choose a husband or a wife for another. Now, tell me what you want my advice about?"

"He does not care for her," whispered Lady Elmslie to her heart. "And he will not cast away the wonderful gift fortune has thrown into his lap,"—then she said aloud, "I want you to look at these memoranda and my bank-book, and advise me how is best to invest this money. It is rather stupid to have a considerable sum lying idle." She laid some papers and her bank-book before him. He drew a chair to the table, and began to examine them with interest.

Lady Elmslie stood beside him leaning one hand on the back of his chair, looking down upon the documents she had given him.

"Certainly," said Brandon at last turning, and raising his head to look into the earnest eyes bent upon him, "this is far too large a sum to lie fallow. You

rob yourself of two or three hundred a year of income. But why apply to me? Your solicitors can give you excellent advice, and find investments for you also."

"Yes, but then they are such strangers, while you are so old and dear a friend, that I thought I should like to consult you."

"Oh, of course, if you wish, but really your men of business are better advisers than I can be."

"Ralph," she exclaimed with a deep sigh, letting her hand drop from the back of the chair to his shoulder, "will you never forget and forgive?" There was a slight tremor in her tones.

"I have forgiven—utterly—completely!" returned Brandon, greatly surprised. "Why do you doubt it?"

"You are so cold, so indifferent, to my affairs, to myself."

"I am not indeed, Lady Elmslie; I am not so ungrateful."

"Ah! it is not a question of gratitude. I know you despise me for deserting you in your time of trouble, for my interested marriage. Oh! I must speak out to you at last, my heart is so full."

"You may speak freely," returned Brandon with anxious composure.

"I know what pain I caused you, what cruel disappointment, but——" She paused.

"You did perfectly right. You knew what you wanted. Had you been ideally faithful, we should have hated each other cordially by this time. You could not have roughed it as my wife, without developing a strong dislike to the author of your discomfort, and I could not have watched the refriger-

ating process, without decided resentment. Depend upon it, things have arranged themselves for the best."

"I cannot think so, Ralph," murmured Lady Elmslie, her long slender fingers pressing on his shoulder, as she partly averted her face. "I am a wretchedly lonely woman. I can have no home, for no one cares a straw for me, and yet I have wealth. You see how much wealth—which I long to utilise for—for *you*, Ralph, now at the turning point of your career, I would—I wish, oh! can you not understand me?" (Brandon had turned slightly away, and resting his elbow on the table, leant his head on his hand.) "And the years have dealt lightly with me, Ralph. Lady Elmslie is as bright—as Beatrice Warren."

Brandon was infinitely touched, and pained to hear this proud fair woman absolutely pleading for his love.

"Lady Elmslie is beautiful enough and charming enough to command the warmest devotion," he said in a low tone, taking the hand which lay upon his shoulder and kissing it. "Do not let the shadows of a gloomy past blind you to the brilliant future which is in your grasp. I can be nothing to you—I have neither power, position, fortune, nor—heart to give you."

"No heart!" she exclaimed, drawing away her hand, and growing very white. "My God, Ralph, who has your heart, then? or is it dead?" she exclaimed.

"Do not ask me any more. I know how generous your motives are. You wish to atone for the

suffering you inflicted on me. I *was* awfully broken-hearted about you, to lose you was a cruel loss: now we must let bygones be bygones! I am not a lucky fellow—leave me to carve my own road, and still give me your friendship."

Lady Elmslie drew back, her grand eyes flashing. "Ralph," she exclaimed, "you cannot deceive me, you love Claude Tracey, and she will revenge *me*. She can never forget that you insulted her by your avowedly mercenary offer of marriage. She has all an inexperienced girl's romantic ideas, and does not know, as *I* do, the desperate necessities of real life. She will *never* love you."

"Very likely," returned Brandon coolly, as he rose and stood opposite her. "But I don't see what that has to do with the question. Why should you want revenge upon me? I have never done you any wrong? It is not worthy of you, a clear-sighted sensible woman,—to let yourself be blinded by imagination."

"I am not blinded. I know what I want, I am miserable! I cannot hold back the words, which I know degrade me. Have you no tender memories of old happy days, when I was all the world to you? Could I not be even more so in the future, now that I have the means to help you, and the will, the earnest desire? But,"—suddenly recognising the hopelessness of her appeal—"I waste my breath—, I abase myself to the dust for nothing. You have gone from me, to one who does not value you. This is the irony of fate!" She covered her face with her hands, and threw herself into a chair.

"Do not speak so harshly, Lady Elmslie. You

pain me infinitely. Pray remember, I do not admit the truth of your assertions. I am by no means bound to confess the motives which actuate me. A year hence, you will no doubt feel grateful to me for not taking advantage of your generosity, when you find men infinitely more worthy of you than I am, eagerly contending for your favour. Forget this momentary hallucination, be yourself again. You may be sure no trace of it shall remain in my memory, nothing respecting you shall dwell there, save the regard of a sincere friend——"

"Be silent," said Lady Elmslie in a low deep tone. "Do not mock me; I loved you well even when I forsook you—I love you still, and you—have given your love to that cold inanimate girl, who is infinitely more worldly than I am! She is attracted by the tinsel glitter of Philip Brandon's brightness, still more by the miserable puerility of his commonplace title; she fancies he holds back because he's too honourable to seek what he needs, a well-dowered wife; she laughs at you first, for proposing for her, and then showing your hand, while she counts on your generosity for the fortune she means to bring him. Remember she is quite confidential with *me*. You do not know her as I do—*no* man ever fathoms a cool, reserved woman. If she can love any one, she loves Philip Brandon."

"Well if they are fond of each other, I shall offer no obstacle to their marriage. Claude might do much worse, as you say a reserved woman is somewhat difficult to fathom, and I ought to feel grateful to you for the light you afford me by—communicating—I will not say *betraying*—her confidence."

He could not resist the words, and sent them home with a steady, pitiless glance.

"Leave me," cried Lady Elmslie, rising, her eyes burning, her face white with anger. "I can bear no more! Make some excuse to leave the house to-morrow. I hope never to see your face again."

Brandon took his hat, bowed profoundly, and silently left the room. He was greatly disturbed. Naturally anxious to avoid meeting any one until he got his thoughts into some order, he strolled away towards the little fishing village before mentioned.

That Lady Elmslie should have made such an avowal amazed him. He had so completely lost his old feelings for her, that he did not catch any glimpse of the fire which underlay the smooth friendly composure of her manner to him. He was shocked and shamed by her outburst, and would have felt sorry for her—profoundly sorry—but for her bitter attack on Claude.

In doing this, Lady Elmslie did not quite know her ground. She was not aware how close an intimacy had sprung up between him and his ward—the intimacy which springs up from mutual understanding. Brandon by no means believed all his old love had asserted respecting Claude, but that she was attracted by his kinsman was highly probable; that she should look on himself as an ambitious, unimpassioned worldling with sufficient justice and good nature to be trusted and liked, but not loved, was still more probable. That she cared for a title, *for* fineries of any kind, he did not believe. She might be cold as far as love was concerned, that he could not tell. If so, it would be a living death to be *her*

husband, for well he knew that nothing short of the glowing tenderness which true love alone can give would satisfy the strong passion for her which had taken root in his heart, and permeated his whole being.

How pale and slight and simple she looked beside the grandeur of Lady Elmslie's beauty, yet Brandon felt it would be worth a lifetime to win her heart, to read responsive warmth in her eyes, to feel the rapture of her willingly bestowed caress. Claude Tracey possessed the inexhaustible charm the potent spell, of reserved, self-controlled women. With her, there was always something more to win, something more to find out. But she was true, and nobly simple. He knew this, and the knowledge distressed him. It explained the curious delicate shade of difference in her manner ever since that day—the last really happy day he had spent with her. How heavenly it was! He felt he had been less guarded than usual, and, fool that he was, even fancied that there was an indication of reciprocity in the infinite happiness she had expressed. Ever since, she had been different. Her honesty would not permit her to mislead him if her heart was yielding to Philip Brandon, who certainly sought her diligently of late.

Great God! was that thoughtless, good-humoured boy, as he seemed to Brandon's stronger, deeper nature, to rob him a second time, and of a treasure infinitely more precious, more passionately desired than land or gold or rank or anything? And this treasure, was Philip capable of appreciating it? No, a thousand times no. "And I must give up hope—resign myself to such desolation without a struggle? Or

shall I seek her out, forestall Philip, avow my own feelings, and give myself a chance? Might not this destroy our friendship, and open a gulf between us, across which it would be difficult to stretch a helping hand if she needed it? No, I will do nothing hasty. I will watch and wait. There is little hope for me —I must not disgust her. I am no favourite with fortune! I suppose I am not a sort of fellow that women like, except the one I don't want. This passage lived through, there's nothing but ambition's ladder for me, and I'll climb that, if Old Nick himself loosened the rungs!"

Lady Elmslie never played the part of hostess more brilliantly than that evening. Some visitors to the Manor came with Colonel Clavering, and his mother came to dinner, and the fair hostess was the life of the party.

Next day Brandon had letters which obliged him to return to town. Sir Philip allowed himself to be persuaded to stay on, as Lady Elmslie declared she would not be quite deserted by her original guests, when the next party arrived.

She came out on the front door steps to bid Brandon an effusive "God speed" in face of the whole congregation, while under her breath she said emphatically, "This is indeed good-bye."

CHAPTER XXII.

"MISUNDERSTANDING."

MEANWHILE all went well with the happy family in Wales. Kate was even more enterprising and animated than usual. She was up at any hour and ready to go fishing with the Major, when and where he liked. Claude was always quiet, but her aunt found her a most sympathetic listener, and deeply interested in Mrs. Selby's grand scheme of making a fernery, mixed with pieces of rock, in the conservatory which opened from the first landing in their Gainsborough Gardens house. To collect curious ferns and stones for this object was a great occupation, so time went by swiftly and pleasantly.

The autumn days were shortening, and Aunt Selby began to talk of starting on that tour through the wilder and more picturesque parts of the principality with which they intended to bring their outing to a conclusion, when Brandon made his appearance, rather unexpectedly, and threw himself heartily into the pursuits of the little party to which he was most welcome.

It was a glorious night about a week after Brandon's arrival, and neither Claude nor her cousin felt disposed to retire to rest at once. The chamber they shared was above the sitting-room and commanded a wide view over sea and mountain, now sleeping in inexpressible beauty under the soft silvery moonbeams. Kate, the

more practical of the two, withdrew the comb from her hair and shook out her nut-brown tresses slowly; Claude seated herself on the window ledge half out of the open casement, gazing silently on the loveliness of heaven and earth, and inhaling the delicious fragrance of the dewy grass and leaves. Both girls, unaccustomed to be waited upon, were glad enough to send the lady's maid who was indispensable at Becksdale, back to London and assisted each other in their toilette.

"It seems a shame to go to bed," said Kate, slipping off her gown and putting on a dressing jacket. "Only that I love going to sleep, I should like to walk down to the beach, though I am sure our couches are not too luxurious! How delightful those French beds at Becksdale are. Come, Claude, leave your dreams and the moonlight, and brush my hair, dear. Then I will do yours."

Claude rose slowly and reluctantly took the brush held out to her.

"I will sit near the window, then you can look out while you brush, only don't knock my head."

Claude gathered up the long soft mass of hair, and proceeded to brush it gently.

"Kate," she said at last, "you are very clever."

"Am I? I'm glad you have found it out. What especial side of my cleverness has struck you now?"

"Your observation. Why were you so certain that Lady Elmslie would never accept Sir Philip Brandon?"

"Because—oh, because I was certain. Don't *you* feel she never would care for him?"

"Yes, I think I do. Yet he is very nice."

"Oh, yes, nice enough"—with a quick sigh—"still he would not do for her."

"Nor did he care about her," added Claude. "But you—you seemed to think that Lady Elmslie liked some one else better?"

"Yes, so she does."

"How did you find that out, Kate?"

"I opened my eyes, and saw."

"Who is it?" asked Claude, low and earnestly.

"Do go on brushing; that intermittent action is most irritating. Who is it? Some one you are very fond of, and no wonder. But I am pretty sure that if he marries Lady Elmslie, you will not see much more of him."

"Can you mean——"

"Mr. Brandon. Yes, of course. Why, I saw it the first day he came, though I must say she was very guarded on the whole, but those fine eyes of hers would speak."

"It is strange, the idea never occurred to me."

"No, I daresay it did not. You have been in the clouds rather lately."

"But, Kate, Lady Elmslie has always been so nice. Why should she keep Mr. Brandon away from us?"

"Oh, Claude, I never can give reasons, I only feel. I should be so sorry to lose Mr. Brandon if he were my guardian. I'd fight for him, tooth and nail! He is so nice, I rather think that if he ever took a fancy to me—made love to me I mean—I should be awfully fond of him. But he is innocent of any such tendency, and I am not the sort of girl to fade away, because I

have an unrequited attachment. Still I like him ever so much better than I used, and I don't want him to marry Lady Elmslie."

"Why not, Kate? It is just the marriage that would suit him. He wants a clever woman of the world. Lady Elmslie would be a help to him."

"Well, I had other plans. There, dear, that will do thanks! Now sit down, yes, you must, you never can manage that mane of yours;" and Kate starting up, swung back her own locks, and twisted them deftly into a large loose knot. Then gently pressing her cousin into her chair, she proceeded to return her good offices. Presently she said as if out of her thoughts:

"I wonder if Sir Philip will like Hungary."

"Very probably he will, if he finds plenty of sport and amusement," returned Claude.

"Still, Claude, I suppose he can live without amusement?"

"I don't think he ever tried!"

"I don't suppose he is worse than other men who have nothing to do and heaps of money to do it with," returned Kate. "I wonder if we shall ever see him again."

"Why, yes, of course we shall. I feel quite sure of that."

"I am not," said Kate in a low voice, as if to herself. Then, after a short pause, she resumed in a more animated tone, "I wonder if we could persuade Mummy to come to Paris this winter? I have always longed to go to Paris."

"I want to go too," exclaimed Claude. "Let us see what we can do." They continued to discuss the plan with great interest after the hair brushing was over,

till Kate exclaimed, "There, I cannot keep my eyes open any longer, so good-night!"

Claude rose and kissed her—not a very usual manifestation on her part, for neither of the cousins were by any means gushing. "We are always to be friends, dear, whatever happens, whether you marry or not."

"Yes, certainly," returned Kate sleepily. "But we shall both marry charming men, and live happily near each other ever after. Go to bed like a good girl. Why it must be nearly twelve o'clock."

But Claude returned to her seat in the window, before she finally laid her head on the pillow.

Kate's remarks had recalled many trifling incidents which, scarcely heeded at the time, had sunk into her memory, and now stood out as clear as evidence that the old "love" to which Brandon still clung was Lady Elmslie herself.

* * * * *

The next day was fresh and bright. Soon after breakfast, the party dispersed to their various occupations.

"How far can you walk, Claude?" asked Brandon half an hour after, as they stood at the entrance of the glen looking down at the eager river rushing and chafing at their feet.

"Oh, a long way, quite to the top of the glen, then I can show you a short path back."

"Very well, and no doubt we shall find a resting place on the way."

"Yes, this glen is a favourite haunt of Janet's and mine."

"It is most picturesque, yet it is not so beautiful as the ravine through which you led me at Becksdale. I always think of that ramble as something wonderfully charming."

"Yes, it was very nice," returned Claude in the most commonplace tone she could assume. Claude forced herself to be almost as she used to be, almost —but there was something wanting which Brandon perceived though he could not define. They had got past the middle of the glen, and sat down to rest on a fallen tree.

"What has become of the lecture you were going to give me?" asked Claude, looking up in his face with a smile.

"I am about to begin," he returned softly. "But the lecture will be about myself, Claude."

"So much the better. Let us stroll on."

"Will you answer me one or two questions quite frankly?"

"I will try."

"Cautious demoiselle. Well, I am going into Devonshire to-morrow. I am going to stay with Lord S——, whom I have known for a long time. He says he has some plans to discuss with me. Now, from certain rumours, I think it possible he may wish to send me on a mission abroad."

"That will be good for you, would it not?"

"Well, yes, unless I mismanaged it."

"Ah! you would not do that."

"Let us hope not. Now tell me, Claude, should you think I neglected my duty if I left you to the care of your uncle?"

"No, certainly not. Why should I be a mill-stone

round your neck? Besides, don't you think I could take care of myself?"

"Perhaps! But I should not like to see you reduced to a self-preservation system. Claude, I am fanciful for the first time in my life, and I believe, or fancy, there is a subtle, indefinable change in you—that you trust me less—that some one or something has come between us? Be frank, Claude, you trust your guardian?"

"Completely, thoroughly," she exclaimed. "Can you doubt it? You have been good and true to me. I am not ungrateful."

"Don't talk of gratitude! All I ask is confidence. For another year your fate is—in a measure—in my hands, and in all matters touching your happiness I should like to grant you your heart's desire."

"You are always kind, but to-day I have no heart's desire to fulfil. You know how I love home and peace. I have both."

"Your present placidity may not last, Claude, and should disturbance come, trust me to help you, to understand you. You will always trust me?"

"My dear guardian, what catastrophe do you anticipate?" asked Claude, looking at him with a smile. "I am a very ordinary, commonplace person, and not likely to get into scrapes and difficulties."

"You think me a fanciful idiot, I see. But I believe I know you better than you do yourself, and I suspect there is plenty of fire under the snow of your quiet exterior, if one could get at it," he added with a quick sigh.

"Perhaps so! I do not pretend to know myself."

There was a pause, then with a slight hesitation and an increase of colour, Claude began :

"There is something I want to consult you about, and you must speak frankly."

"What! a difficulty already, Claude?"

"No, I am quite clear of any complication. But I have a great wish to go to Paris this winter."

"To Paris?" repeated Brandon sharply, looking with keen, inquiring eyes into hers. "Why?"

"I have never been there, and I have a great wish to see it. Of course I want to take my home with me, and Uncle Selby is not rich. Can I with prudence pay for all?"

"I do not think it would ruin you, Claude." He paused and seemed to reflect. "If you took your uncle and his family with you, there are certain items of expenditure you ought to pay, but there is no reason why you should not. I can arrange it all with Major Selby, if you wish it very much. I thought you were quite content with London."

"I am—like others—liable to change, and you—like an obedient guardian—will kindly humour me."

"I suppose I must," said Brandon very gravely.

They walked on in silence for some minutes, then Claude asked timidly, "If you accept this mission, shall you be long away?"

"At present I know nothing; I only surmise. I should not have mentioned the matter had I not been anxious to know what your view of my duties might be—and your wish to winter in Paris has done much to enlighten me."

"How is that?"

"That is my secret."

"Will you not explain some time?"

"I will perhaps before you go to the Gallic capital."

"We must climb up among these rocks," said Claude, for they had reached the head of the little glen, where the stream fell suddenly from a considerable height. "When we are at the top, there is quite a short way to walk."

This obstacle overcome, Brandon seemed to pull himself together, and made an effort to amuse and interest his companion. The conversation turned on books and travels, and flowed almost as freely as formerly. Yet both perceived a difference, which neither could define.

The next day Brandon bid his hosts good-bye, and the following week Major Selby got his party into light marching order, and they started on their projected tour.

Lady Elmslie never had had so bad a time of it as during the weeks succeeding Brandon's departure.

All day long she was under the terrible necessity of a polite hostess, while her heart burned within her, and the intolerable anguish of disappointment and mortification ate into her soul. Nor could she for a moment forget that she had herself at the outset encouraged Brandon in his project of marrying old Tracey's daughter. How cruelly everything had turned out. When Brandon first confided his views to her, Lord Elmslie appeared to be in the most robust health, and knowing that a rich wife was very necessary to Brandon, her only hope was that his wife might be an inoffensive nonentity, who could in no way interfere with the friendship she had so carefully cultivated between her former lover and herself.

She was very proud of having held him by a silken thread—generally ill-treated lovers became either bitterly inimical or contemptuously indifferent—whereas Brandôn was quietly civil and evidently had no objection to talk pleasantly with her on abstract subjects. Hence she argued, some lingering glow of the old fire must still exist; and fondly believing this, she unconsciously built up her whole future upon this delicious hope.

When Brandon had told her that Claude might marry Philip Brandon if she chose, she clung desperately to this straw, forcing herself to believe against the intention of her instinct that it was not to his ward Ralph had lost his heart, which he had confessed was no longer in his own keeping—somehow nothing seemed so hopeless to Lady Elmslie as the ascendancy of Claude Tracey.

The effect of this desperate struggle against the conviction which forced itself upon her was torturing. She always looked back to the month succeeding Ralph's departure as the worst of life's road.

Yet with marvellous courage and resolution she hid her wounds, and presented a fair face to the merciless eyes of the world with which she was surrounded.

It was an infinite relief when her last guests departed, and some *contretemps* prevented those whom she expected from succeeding them.

Sir Philip Brandon had gone into Yorkshire to witness a race for which he had backed a horse ridden by O'Hara—previously—he had a visit or two to pay. Lady Elmslie was therefore alone, save for the presence of Mr. Grantley, when Philip returned to

pass a couple of days on his way to London, with the charming widow.

He was struck by her changed appearance, her face looked thin, her fine colour was gone, her eyes looked larger, and were strangely restless, while the hand she extended to him was burning.

"What have you been doing to yourself?" he exclaimed, with his usual blunt good nature. "If you don't mind what you are about you'll have a fever, and you ought to go to town and get advice. Change of air and scene might do even without the doctor. Don't you think so?" to Mr. Grantley who had just come in from a drive in his favourite low pony carriage.

"No. Lady Elmslie has been in capital form—bright as ever, by gad."

"Don't mind him, Lady Elmslie, you and I are in strong sympathy, and I know you are out of sorts."

Lady Elmslie smiled. "Perhaps you are right. I was out rather too late a few days ago one damp, drizzling evening, and I felt a chilled, uncomfortable sensation. I think I shall go up to town. I have this place only a month longer, and now the Stanley Jones' cannot come, there is nothing to keep me here. Now tell me about the race; I see our good friend came in first."

"He did; he never rode better. It was a very close thing, and he has won a pot of money."

"And you—have you lost a pot of money?" asked Lady Elmslie, with a pleasant laugh.

"No, by Jove, of course I bet on the great O—I always do. It was to be my last indiscretion, so I went the entire animal—I don't know why—anyhow

I have made a right good thing of it. Now I am going to be as prudent as a model Sunday-school boy."

"Stick to that, my dear fellow," said Mr. Grantley, shaking his head sagely as he went off to dress for dinner. "Stick to that and look out for a wealthy wife."

When the chief ceremony of the day was over, and the elderly beau dropped asleep behind the shelter of his newspaper, Lady Elmslie and Sir Philip sat talking confidentially by the fire.

After discussing various people and things, Philip suddenly asked, "Is Clavering down here now?"

"No, he went off somewhere south about a fortnight ago. His mother called yesterday, and seemed in some distress of mind. It seems Colonel Clavering is making a short tour in Wales with the Selbys and Claude Tracey. Evidently Mrs. Clavering is afraid that Claude is not the attraction."

"Ah, yes, of course not. Any one with half an eye could see that. So he is travelling about with them, eh? An agreeable companion, with his sour face and gloomy temper! I wonder an honest-hearted, good fellow like Selby would think of such a mute at a funeral for his daughter."

"Perhaps he does not. Young people nowadays generally manage their own affairs; you cannot tell how Colonel Clavering might brighten up under the influence of such a companion as Kate Selby; besides, he is not a bad catch for a girl without money," said Lady Elmslie, who took rather a malicious pleasure in teasing him without a purpose.

"Why, what has he?—a beggarly two or three thousand a year!"

"It is unencumbered,"—significantly.

"That is rather a cruel speech. But the fellow is too old for her; why, he is years older than I am."

"And yours is the standard age for Miss Selby, I suppose?"

"Put me out of running, Lady Elmslie; an unlucky chap like me does not count."

"Nonsense, my dear Sir Philip, do not yield to ill luck. There is fortune and a charming wife ready for you if you will stretch out your hand to take them."

"Where?" asked Sir Philip, with an incredulous laugh.

"Why, in Wales at present—I mean little Miss Tracey."

"Oh, she would not have me. I fancy she likes somebody else."

"Who?" cried Lady Elmslie, with eagerness she could not quite repress. "Ralph Brandon?"

"No, no. I can't fancy any woman taking the liberty of falling in love with that old sobersides. No, I rather think from some chaff I have heard at the Selbys' that she had some love passages with a young German officer. Then, of course, Ralph would never agree to a marriage between me and his ward."

"There you are mistaken. I had some confidential talk with Mr. Brandon, when he assured me that if his ward liked you, he would give his consent, for you were a good fellow and would go straight now you had sown a sufficient crop of will oats."

"Did he? Well I should not have expected so much," returned Philip, considerably gratified. "Yes,

it would be a capital thing for me—and I daresay Miss Tracey is far away too good for me—she is a sweet little girl, but what is the use, Lady Elmslie, if you cannot spur yourself up to falling in love."

"You Englishmen are such unmanageable creatures. Our neighbours in France are much more reasonable. There, if a man's parents arrange a marriage for him, he contrives to get up a certain amount of sentiment and affection for his *fiancée*, be what she may. You could soon put that German out of Claude Tracey's head. Why don't you try? I should be amused if my two fair guests were married before Christmas."

Sir Philip rose, walked towards the windows and back, affecting to look for a fan which he brought to Lady Elmslie to shade her eyes from the fire, and resumed his seat.

"Well, under certain conditions, I should not mind having a try," he said.

"What are the conditions, Sir Philip?" she asked.

"Ah, that is my secret," he returned. "I'll let you know in a few weeks."

"I fancy I can guess," cried Lady Elmslie, laughing. "Don't be silly, nor let the grass grow under your feet; go up to town and try your chance, before you expatriate yourself."

"I'll take your advice," exclaimed Sir Philip. "Always under certain conditions to be named hereafter."

"Very well, and I should be inclined to back you," said Lady Elmslie with an encouraging little nod.

"She was always very nice and friendly," said Sir Philip in a musing tone, "but——"

"Oh, but me no buts," cried Lady Elmslie, rising. "'Faint heart never won fair lady'; go in and win, and you'll bless me all your life after."

"I shall bless you anyhow as the queen of charming hostesses. Very well, I will go on the day after to-morrow to Marley Grange, the Wrayfords' place. I am booked for ten days there, and after that to London. Shall I see you in town?"

"Yes, I shall be there for a few days. I think of Paris—and perhaps, if the weather is bad, I shall go to Biarritz. My brother-in-law is waking up. Do you play piquet? It would be a charity to indulge him in a game."

"At least," thought Lady Elmslie, as she sat over her dressing-room fire, to which the chill autumnal weather entitled her, after she had dismissed her maid—"at least I have made a promising attempt to checkmate Ralph Brandon, if he does care for Claude. Who or what she cares for, nobody knows. I thought I should have got at the secret of her heart that day when I had that headache, but she was quite impervious. If Kate Selby accepts Colonel Clavering, which is highly probable, and Philip Brandon presses his suit (as he will under the spur of mortification should Kate marry), Claude will probably yield, and then—and then Ralph will be left to his own device. If—oh, if, he should return to me, what a heavenly retribution I should hold in my hands—and should not fail to use it. No human being ever had it in their power to hurt me as he has done, and he used that power to the full. I shall have done with him for ever when once I have had my revenge, not till then." She put out her candle, lying down by the

firelight, and slept better than she had done for many a night.

Sir Philip Brandon too was wakeful and wrote one or two letters before he slept. Then he looked closely into his betting book, made one or two calculations, which, from the expression of his face, seemed highly satisfactory.

"I ought to do for eighteen months, at least, on this amount," he murmured as he rolled up a cigarette, "and not touch any of my own funds. At this rate, three years' close shaving would nearly put me to rights. Ay, but what business have I to ask a girl to wait for me? At present I dare not offer myself to her, and can I expect her to reject another man, who has a comfortable home and an 'unencumbered income,' as Lady Elmslie observed so pointedly, for the uncertainties of a 'will-o'-the-wisp' like myself? How infernally crass everything is! By heaven, if she marries that ill-tempered hound, I will go in for the heiress, but I can't bear the thought of that bright darling being tied to a tyrannical brute. My God! he might break her heart!"

He drew paper and ink towards him once more, and wrote:

"DEAR O'HARA,

"I shall be in town about the tenth. Any chance of seeing you there? I want to consult you about one or two matters. Don't you think you might come as far as Paris with me? I am awfully down in my luck, though in one way luck has been kinder to me of late. I find Lady Elmslie out of sorts, something has gone wrong—more's the pity—she's a splendid

creature. Address me up to 8th at Marley Grange. Good-night, and more power to you.

"Yours always,

"PHILIP BRANDON."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"LOVE CONQUERS."

The leaves were falling fast, the evenings were shortening, slight frosts were crisping suburban gardens at early dawn, and cabs, heavily laden with luggage, were constantly rolling through the streets, as the citizens and their families flocked homeward from their *villeggiatura.*

London was gathering together her mighty army of workers, who, refreshed by their brief rest, returned to drive their respective ploughs with renewed vigour.

It was dinner-time, and Captain O'Hara was deeply engaged with the *carte* in the dining-room of his club.

"There now, slice of turbot, cut of roast saddle of mutton, partridge, and a savoury. Look sharp! I expect Sir Philip Brandon. He wants to catch the Paris express, and I am going North by the 8.50 from Euston Square," he said to the waiter.

"Very well, sir," and the attendant hurried away. There were but few members in the room. It was early for sportsmen to leave moor and mountain, and not seeing any acquaintance, O'Hara took up an evening paper to while away the time. He had not read long, when a slap on the shoulder made him look up to find Sir Philip Brandon beside him.

"Oh, you are there, are you. I was just getting afraid you would be late. You are a most unpunctual fellow! 'Pon my soul it has been a heart-break to try and get you into regular ways."

"Come, O'Hara, you know you never gave me the best teaching, example."

"Never mind. I always gave you the best advice. Sit down, we have an hour and a half and can dine in peace. Hurry is the devil's, always, as the Arabs say, but the worst thing to hurry is dinner. When did you come up?"

"Two days ago."

Here their repast was placed on the table, and conversation became intermittent, until the pangs of hunger were satisfied, and dessert was reached.

"I was sorry I could not be at the Dulhurst races," said O'Hara, filling his glass. "I am told it was a very close thing between 'Petronella' and 'Rookwood.'"

"It was. No one dreamed the mare would come in first. Somehow when I had a look at her a few days before, it struck me that her lighter build and quieter temper would stand her in good stead against 'Rookwood,' so I yielded to a strong temptation and backed her."

"Now didn't you promise——"

"Just hear me out. I have won over a thousand on the event, and if I hadn't been so cursedly prudent, I might have won three."

"By George! It is just like you to be prudent in the wrong place."

"I thought you were angry with me for betting at all."

"Not when you win, my boy."

"The fact is, O'Hara, you have no principle."

"No bad language, if you please. I have as much principle as my neighbours. By the way, is Lady Elmslie in town?"

"She is. I was with her this morning. She is going to Algeria, at least she will end there, as she intends to stop a while in Florence and other places."

"Don't you think it would improve your mind to stop awhile in Florence, and other places too," said O'Hara insinuatingly.

"It would not improve my temper," said Sir Philip laughing. "That cock won't fight, O'Hara. I'll tell you who I stumbled on yesterday in Bond Street, Clavering, and I never saw a fellow look so down in his luck."

"Ah, yes. I met him the other day coming out of the Horse-Guards. Why, he was hardly able to say a civil word; but I have a shrewd idea what ails him. I heard from a man I know, and who knows him, that he was travelling about in Wales with the Selbys. Now it's my opinion that he has got the sack."

"Do you think so?" said Sir Philip looking up quickly and then averting his eyes. "Pray who has spurned him?"

"Well, I suppose you can guess," returned O'Hara with a knowing look. "A sweet soul, but imprudent —deucedly imprudent. Clavering is a good catch for a portionless girl, and that bright-eyed darling would have twisted him round her pretty little finger."

"I am not so sure of that, O'Hara, and it would be an awful pity to see such a bright creature crushed

by an obstinate brute like Clavering. I am glad she sent him about his business."

"Hum—ah, well, it's no affair of ours," exclaimed O'Hara, anxious to change the subject. "So you are off to Paris, and very right too. London is deuced dull at this time of the year, and Fairford is worse."

"There's a rich Chinaman, I mean a China merchant, in treaty for it, for renting it I mean—I rather hope he'll bite. The old place would be well kept up, and by the time I want to settle down and live there, it would be free."

"That's good, and after Paris, where?"

"Oh, Vienna, for a few weeks. Then on to Hungary, quite a new country to me."

"I daresay you'll have a right good time of it."

"No, not I. I never enjoy anything now. In short, life is not worth living!"

"Don't talk such rot," cried O'Hara. "Why, you'll be fresh as a four-year-old by the time you have killed your first bear, or wolf, or whatever beasts you find in those parts. Then think of the beautiful Hungarian women, my boy, all running after the elegant young English nobleman."

"Thanks for the peerage," said Sir Philip.

"Well, Lord—or Sir, it's all the same to foreigners. Any way you are off the common. Look here now, write and let me know what you are doing, and don't harden your heart against all the princesses, and countesses that will be proposing for you."

"Oh, no, of course not. I will collect their photos, and send them to you. You shall choose the most promising for me, as you are far more interested in the matter than I am."

"What's the matter with you? I don't like to see you in this sort of mood. Be a sensible fellow, and leave dull care behind you. As soon as I have sold some horses I expect a good bit for, and settle some other matters, I wouldn't mind joining you at any reasonable distance. By George!" he exclaimed looking at his watch, "I had better be off. Here, waiter, call a hansom, my traps are below. Write to me from Paris to-morrow; I shall be at the Balmoral, Edinburgh, for a few days. My homage to Lady Elmslie. Ah, you'll not find *her* match in Hungary or out or it." A hearty handshake, and O'Hara hurried away.

Sir Philip spoke to one or two acquaintances, lit a cigar, and strolled out into the crisp night air. Turning from Pall Mall, he passed into St. James' Park, and proceeded in the direction of the Grosvenor Hotel, where he was staying, to get his luggage and catch his train. He had plenty of time, and he let his thoughts follow their natural tendency.

He was right glad that Kate Selby had refused that sulky dog, Clavering. "She was not the sort of girl to give herself to any man she did not love. No, there was a refreshing honesty about her, a strength, a brightness! It was too hard to go off to remote regions for months, without a word of farewell, when he would probably never see her as Kate Selby again. She is just the sort of girl no end of fellows will want to marry, and she will find some one she would like among them. She didn't care a rap for me. Stay—I have sometimes fancied she might have liked me if I had dared to try for her. Why, I don't know, it is a sort of intuition. Need I go to Paris to-night?

I am my own master, and old O'Hara isn't here to chivvy me. It wouldn't be civil to leave without saying good-bye to Major and Mrs. Selby. No, by Jove! it would be deuced ill-bred. Then I can hear what's settled about Fairford before I start to-morrow. What a state the great 'O' would be in if he knew what I'm thinking of!—though I've heard the old villain quote, 'There's nothing half so sweet in life, as love's young dream,' over and over again."

By this time he had reached his hotel. "Here waiter, take my luggage back to my room, I shall not go to-night."

A few days before this dinner and parting, Major Selby marched his party safely into winter quarters.

Their expedition had been pleasant enough till they were joined by Clavering, after which Claude at least perceived a certain degree of constraint on Kate's part which she found no difficulty in understanding—indeed she found some amusement in watching and seconding her cousin's dexterous avoidance of a *tête-à-tête* with him. He generally consoled himself by bestowing his care and company on Mrs. Selby, in whose good graces he contrived to get himself shortly before they reached Shrewsbury, from which place they were to journey direct to town. Colonel Clavering found himself obliged to bid them good-bye and travel in another direction. This change of places did not attract Major Selby's attention, but his wife looked a little grave and uneasy.

All things went on much as usual, until the third morning after their arrival at home.

There were several letters awaiting the Major when he descended to breakfast, from his dressing-

'oom. He looked through them in unusual silence, ıs he generally communicated the contents to the ıssembled family. On this occasion he only said, ' Excellent news from ——" and handed one of his etters to Mrs. Selby, who put it in the pocket of her ıpron, until breakfast was over.

Kate remained a little longer than Claude in the ining-room, as she wanted to read the notice of a ew play at the "Court," Major Selby having given a ery cursory glance at its contents, and then retired ɔ his study with a very serious face.

Presently the parlour-maid cut Kate's perusal of the riticism short.

"If you please, Miss, Master wishes to speak to ou in the study."

"What can he want?" exclaimed Kate, and she vent straight to her father's sanctum. There she was confronted by both parents, who were seated at either ıide of the knee-hole table, both looking preternatu-ally solemn. Kate looked from one to the other. Then her father said in an odd, unsteady voice :

"Katie, dear, I have a letter from Clavering. He says you have rejected him, and he asks my influence to persuade you to reconsider your decision. I don't want to interfere with your wishes on the subject, my darling ; but, when—your mother, however, thinks the matter ought to be laid before you——"

"Yes! my dear child," began Mrs. Selby. "Just sit down and listen to me. What is your objection to Colonel Clavering?"

"Objection! I don't like him," said Kate.

"But why don't you like him?"

"I scarcely know why, but I don't."

"That is no reason, Katie," said her mother.

"He is a very honourable man," put in the Major. "He was rather reserved, but an excellent officer, and well thought of at headquarters. I am sure you have some good reason, my love, for dismissing him so summarily?"

"I tried to be kind, for I was sorry for him," returned Kate, "but I couldn't marry him. He is too old—and too severe—and he has fierce eyes, and I should be afraid of him—and—oh! it would never do at all!"

"I don't see why it should not. He is deeply attached to you, any one could see that—he could give you a charming home—you could make him do whatever you liked, and it is not kind to give pain to one who loves you well! Don't be heartless, Kate!"

"I am not heartless, mother. I am dreadfully sorry for Colonel Clavering, but I cannot help his taking a fancy to me. When he knows I will not marry him he will take a fancy to some one else—and——"

"I am afraid it will go hard with him," said her father, gravely.

"Yes. He is no thoughtless, pleasure-loving man of the world, who doesn't care whom he may hurt provided he amuses himself."

At these words Kate blushed to the roots of her hair and her bright brown eyes filled up.

"We know no people like that, mother," she said, in an unsteady voice. "And I am sure I should not wish to marry such a man. I don't want to marry any one, I want to stay with dear Dad and you,

though you are a little ill-natured Mummy!" and she burst into tears.

"Don't cry, my darling!" exclaimed Major Selby. 'Do what ever you like, but don't cry. Now I think of it, Clavering is altogether too much of a sobersides for you, my sweet one."

"No! Katie," said Mrs. Selby more sedately. 'Don't fancy I would force you to do anything you did not like, in so momentous a matter as marriage. But Colonel Clavering's is a tempting offer, and it would be a comfort to me to know that your future was secure. I hope no nonsensical, romantic dreams are interfering with the solid certainties of so good a match."

"What do you mean?" cried Kate, hastily. "The only certainty I know about the match, as you call it, is the certainty of being miserable. I can't bear the sight of that man," sobbed Kate. "I know he would go mad, and cut my throat!"

"There, there, my darling, that is enough! Not another word shall be said on the subject," cried the Major, resolutely. "Don't say another word to the child" (this to his wife), "the wealth of worlds is not worth *her* tears."

"Oh, Katie, if you feel so strangely on the subject we'll not say another word on the subject. I daresay I am a worldly old woman, but I am only overanxious that you should have a happy, tranquil future."

"You are both too good to me, and I am a heartless creature; but I cannot—I never could marry Colonel Clavering."

"Well, well! do not trouble your head any more

about him. I'll write him a nice civil letter," said Major Selby, rumpling up his hair into a distressing condition at the prospect of the task before him. "Come! kiss your old Dad, my darling, and run off to Claude. Don't trouble your head about Clavering or anything else. I am sorry we bothered you."

"And me too!" said her mother. "I only care for your happiness. Trust me, dear, and be wise."

"Don't be afraid, I shall be as wise as a serpent," cried Kate, cheering up and embracing them both.

Claude was busy regulating her chest of drawers with the assistance of Janet, when Kate entered.

The condition of her eyes at once attracted their attention.

"Why, what in the world is the matter, Kate?" cried Janet, astonished at the aspect of her sister's eyes, for Kate's tears were rare.

"I have been crying," said Kate. "Just fancy—Colonel Clavering has been so foolish as to write to my father to persuade me to marry him, and both father and mother absolutely wished me to say yes! I am awfully vexed about it. I am sorry for him, too! I did not mean to give him pain."

"Well, that can't be helped!" said Janet, sternly. "He must have been very dull indeed not to see that you did not want him. *I* saw through it all," she continued, with an air of superior wisdom.

"There, say no more about it," cried Kate, in an imploring tone. "I wish I had said nothing, but my heart was full."

Silence fell upon them, and presently Kate stole away, and Janet remembered that she wanted to

take a lesson in making an omelette from cook. Claude being alone, almost for the first time since she left Becksdale, began first to think compassionately of Clavering, and then by a natural transition of herself. The whole aspect of life was changed to her since she had left her pleasant kindly home nearly three months ago. She was generally too much occupied with others, too alive to their claims on her sympathy, her assistance, her quiet counsels, to have time to grieve over her cruel awakening. It *was* cruel to discover almost at the same moment that she loved Brandon, and that he was scarcely worthy of her affection. Yet he was generous, he was infinitely considerate in all small things of herself. That he should love Lady Elmslie was no just cause of displeasure: she would make him a most suitable wife—if—if only, he had not tried to secure her (Claude) for her wealth's sake, when he thought his early love was quite out of his reach, she would have nothing to complain of: there lay the sting. She could quite bear to think of him as the husband of another—could she know that he was all she once believed him to be. Yet she felt there was still a charm in his voice, his manner, his conversation, that was almost irresistible to her. She almost wished she might never see him again—almost? Not altogether. Had some prophetic voice suddenly uttered a sentence of irrevocable separation, would she not have prayed for its mitigation even with tears?

For this she despised herself. Claude had a strong strain of self-respect and common sense—not pride; for she had a very humble opinion of her own merits, though this did not prevent her from feeling conscious

of a certain power. With those who showed her affection she was gentleness itself, but for all that she was quite capable of saying "No," very firmly. Now she struggled gallantly against the sense of depression, of despair of the future, and steadily turned her thoughts away, to plan a visit to Paris, perhaps to Italy. "I am not the only weak one," she murmured to herself, "Kate wants change as much as I do."

It was, Claude thought, a curious coincidence that next morning's post brought her a letter from Lady Elmslie, informing her of that lady's intentions of coming to town in a few days, on her way to Paris, and inviting Claude very cordially to accompany her, adding quite a list of attractions in the way of society and sight-seeing.

The other was from Brandon, explaining that he had been called away by a letter from Lord S—— the day after the arrival of her uncle's family at their own abode, and he feared it might be a week before he could see her.

This was not unexpected by Claude, as she was aware he was engaged in arranging some plan of importance with the minister, but Lady Elmslie's invitation did surprise her. Though the charming widow had never altered in manner to her, Claude had developed a curious, apparently unfounded distrust of her, for which she could give herself no reason, and the idea of passing a month or two with her ladyship, away from her own dear people, was anything but acceptable. "No, I should like much better to blunder about Paris with you, Katie, than to be led in the right way by Lady Elmslie," she ex-

claimed aloud, for she read the letter in their downstairs morning-room, where they were all busy with work of some kind.

"What do you mean?" asked Kate.

"Read it;" said Claude, handing her the letter.

"It seems very tempting," observed Kate. "Will you not go?"

"Why, it would be delightful," added Janet, who had read the epistle over Kate's shoulder.

"I have a better scheme," replied Claude, "I propose we should all go together—and if uncle and aunt have no objection we shall go."

"To Paris!" screamed both girls together. "What a brick you are, Claude," continued Janet.

"I have mentioned it to Mr. Brandon, and I think he will let me have the money. When I see him again we will settle all about it."

"Then we shall have singing lessons with Wartel," cried Kate.

"And *I* shall attend lectures at the Sorbonne," exclaimed Janet.

"To say nothing of the Théatre Français—and the opera," continued Claude smiling; "and the picture galleries and the streets, which must be a study in themselves."

"Yet I shall be half sorry to leave this house. Fancy how short a time it is since we thought we had touched the highest point of our ambition when we furnished it! I shall always love it," concluded Kate, with a deep sigh.

"But we will return to it," said Claude, in a consoling voice.

"Yes, but you will be of age then, Claude," ob-

served Janet, "and you will want a grand house of your own."

"I want a home—not a mere house, Janet; so I would much prefer staying where I am."

"I should like a house where one might give big dances;" returned Janet thoughtfully.

"Well, Janet, it seems to me you look on Claude's property as if it belonged to yourself."

"I think I do, somehow," said Janet.

"Claude, may I run and catch Dad before he goes out, and talk to him about your delightful Paris scheme?" asked Kate.

"Yes, do if you like, but catch your mother too."

"Oh, she is gone out already to pay the books."

The Major, however, was too full of business to listen.

"I must be off, my dears," he said, when Kate dragged him downstairs. "I had a letter from Brandon. He won't be back for a few days—and he is evidently contemplating some change in his life. He wants to consult very seriously with me about your affairs, Claude. I'm sure they are all perfectly shipshape, and he gives me several commissions to do; I must see about them at once. Then there's a ballot for some new members at the club to-day—and I must call on Sutton, who has come home for good. He is rather a remarkable man, Colonel Sutton—so you must talk to the mother, girls. We are pretty sure to do whatever you like."

They had been nearly a month in town, and already the delicate bloom had faded from Claude's cheek. Her aunt, who was a close observer, perceived that the quiet joy which had shone through all she said and

did, before she had gone to pay her visit to Lady Elmslie, had totally disappeared, though she was cheerful, helpful, sympathetic as ever.

It was a showery afternoon, and Mrs. Selby had gone out to pay visits in the brougham which Brandon considered necessary for his ward.

Claude had begged off, and, with Kate, had settled to a good practice of their somewhat neglected duets.

"It is quite clearing up," said Claude, during a pause, looking out of the window. "I think I shall walk over to see poor dear Tibbets, and hear how she is going on. I have not heard from her for ages."

"Very well, I shall stay at home and write some letters for——"

"Sir Philip Brandon," said the parlour-maid, opening the door. Claude noticed that Kate grew suddenly pale, though she rose with much composure to receive the visitor.

"I am in luck to-day," cried Sir Philip, "to find you in at this hour." He was looking bright, alert, unbrowned, with something of decision in his tone and manner, that became him well. "I heard you were in town, and I could not leave England without saying good-bye, you know. Sorry Mrs. Selby is out," he concluded joyously.

"She will be sorry to miss you," returned Kate demurely.

"And where are you going, Sir Philip?" asked Claude, who felt wonderfully cheered by the presence of the good-humoured, kindly young baronet. He replied by giving a sketch of his intended travels.

"I should very much like to see Hungary," said Claude.

"Then why don't you come. You can do what you like with Major Selby, and I will be the 'Cook' of the party—not in a culinary sense, you know."

"How shall you get on without Captain O'Hara?" asked Kate with an arch smile.

"How will he get on without me, Miss Selby?"

"It is a tremendous problem all round. He came to see us a few days ago and brought me such a sweet little Yorkshire terrier. Is he not kind? I am quite fond of Captain O'Hara."

"He is awfully devoted to you; he is really a good fellow. I should like to see this dog. These Yorkshire terriers are great beauties."

"I will go and bring him. The poor little thing howls so piteously when we sing that we always send him downstairs," and Kate swept swiftly, smoothly out of the room.

As soon as she had disappeared Sir Philip came over and standing before Claude, exclaimed, "Miss Tracey, don't think me a brute, but—don't you think it would be rather nice to go out and walk?"

Claude looked at him, her features relaxing into an amused smile. "Do you want to get rid of me very much?" she asked.

"Well, yes, immensely," was the candid reply. "I am sure you understand me."

"I think I do," said Claude, "so good-bye for the present," giving him a friendly smile as she left the room.

"So far, so good," said Sir Philip to himself, taking a turn up and down the room, "and I wish to Heaven the next quarter of an hour were over."

Before he reached the fireplace a second time, Kate

returned, carrying a diminutive dog with long silky pearl-grey hair, and dark, pathetic eyes peeping out under long curly locks.

"Here he is, is he not a beauty? Captain O'Hara says he is quite two years old and has got over distemper and all the ills that puppy-dog flesh is heir to; unfortunately he has been christened into the bargain, and has not a pretty name. He is called 'Tony.'"

"Tony, is not at all bad," said Sir Philip, "and he is a very well-bred little creature," taking him from her and stroking him, while Tony made frantic efforts to lick his face. Sir Philip set him down, and looking critically at him, remarked. "He is very nearly thoroughbred."

"Very nearly!" repeated Kate indignantly, "why he is quite thoroughbred, though he is such an affectionate little dear, I should be just as fond of him if he were not."

"Then could you forgive a great deal to those who loved you?"

"I think so. Most people would, I imagine. What has become of Claude?"

"Oh, she is obliged to go out to see some one, or call upon somebody, she will not be very long," said he very gravely.

"I know she was going out, but she had nothing very particular to do. I will go and see——"

"No, no, indeed you must not. I want to speak to you. I have wanted to speak to you for months and I *will* now."

"But Sir Philip, I do not want to hear what you

have to say," said Kate, growing white and red by turns.

"Yes, you must. I have come here on purpose to tell you (do listen to me, Kate,) that I cannot bear this misery and uncertainty any longer. I daresay you know right well that I am madly in love with you, and if you will not be my wife, why, I'll infallibly go to squash."

"Sir Philip," drawing away her hand which he had caught, "you must not think of marrying me, you know you must not. You want a wife with money, and I have none. Your friends would think you mad and——"

"My friends," he interrupted indignantly, "what right have they to interfere? I am the only judge of what is best for my happiness. Kate—yes, I will call you Kate—I think of you as Kate, and you are never out of my thoughts—Kate, I know I have been an imprudent, unlucky beggar, and I feel ashamed of myself. I do, by Jove! to think I haven't something better to offer you, but I'm not ruined, mind. If you would, if you could care a little for me, enough to make living out of the London world for a few years tolerable, why, we might enjoy life together; at any rate, it would be divine enjoyment to *me* if you were always near. If you will look straight at me, and say you do not care a rap about me, I'll go off and never trouble you again."

"But, Sir Philip," remonstrated Kate, without looking at him, "it seems to me quite possible that by and by when you find that a wife is no trifling addition to your difficulties and embarrassments, you would regret having one; for I am sure what is riches

to me is poverty to you, our habits are so different, our ideas——"

"Kate," he interrupted, drawing very near, "you have not looked at me yet!"

"Oh, I cannot, I cannot," she exclaimed, turning away and throwing herself into a corner of the sofa.

"Tell me," said Sir Philip again taking her hand, "if I were free from debt, and flourishing, would you marry me?"

"If," said Kate still looking down, "you were earning your bread, were free from debt and had—oh, three or four pounds a week, I don't think I should mind marrying you, Sir Philip. But you are not free; and—oh, I dread being unhappy, and making you unhappy!" She drew away her hand and rose up again, turning her large soft eyes—now full of tears, upon him.

"Ah, Kate, you do care for me a little?" he cried again, following her. "Listen to me, let me tell everything to your father, and if he says yes——"

"Dear Dad!" said Kate with a heavenly smile. "If he does, why, so will I——"

"My own darling?" cried Sir Philip, catching her in his arms.

"No, no, you must not, you ought not! It is too serious and awful to kiss you. It seems as if I must marry you, if I do——"

"Yes, of course you must. It is an indissoluble bond, my love, my life! When can I see Major Selby—to-night?"

"No, he is dining out. To-morrow, before he goes into town."

"And you will tell him why I am coming?"

"Oh, no!" and to his delight he felt her cling to him. "I do not want to say a word to *any one*, till you and he have settled what is to be done. I wonder what he will say?"

"'Yes,' of course."

"I think you must go away now. I feel quite dazed, and strange. I want to be quiet—to collect myself before mother, dear mother!—and Janet come in. That child has lynx eyes: I never can hide anything from her."

"Can't I stay and help you to compose yourself," asked Sir Philip, gazing at her with passionate tenderness.

Kate laughed—was ever anything so delightful as her laugh.

"I am afraid you are not a claimant, Sir Philip."

"Then, my darling, you do love me a little?"

"Ah!" she said with sudden sweet gravity, "I do. God grant my love may bring you happiness."

"It will, it must," he returned, suddenly sobered by this glimpse into the sanctuary of her heart. "I will try to be worthy of it. Now, I will obey you, and go, but just one more kiss before we part. It is horrible to leave you even for a few hours. One more kiss, Kate," and Kate did not refuse.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"THE CLOUDS BREAK."

LADY ELMSLIE felt especially wretched when she woke the morning after her arrival in town.

A sudden sense of loneliness pressed upon her—her life seemed suddenly objectless. What was the use of living! Beauty, charm, rank, riches—all were ineffectual to keep the man she loved. A pale, insignificant, almost penniless girl (for Claude *was* almost penniless if such were the will of Brandon) had the power to draw him from her. All that was left to console her for this terrible failure was to mar the happiness of both.

This was the object she nad in view when she invited Claude to go with her to Paris. It would not, she argued, be difficult to keep Sir Philip there, and even if she could not persuade him to offer himself to that insignificant schoolgirl, his presence there would mislead Brandon, and between the pressure of Claude's mortification—"for she *must* be mortified," mused Lady Elmslie—the coldness of misunderstanding would together raise an imperceptible but effectual barrier between the two and they would drift further and further apart.

For the present her schemes were partially defeated by Claude's unexpected refusal, and Lady Elmslie raged inwardly at this crossing of her will.

There was a gleam of possibilities in the reason

alleged by Claude for declining Lady Elmslie's invitation. If all were in Paris together, she might manage mischief still.

Finding that Brandon was out of town, and not being sure of Sir Philip's address, she devoted a couple of days to the study of her affairs, and decided that once she had succeeded in setting Brandon and Claude safely drifting, she would go on the Continent for a considerable time. "Shall I take poor old Beau Grantley with me?—he might be a safeguard! No! —he would develop into a monstrous bore and become helpless! I can afford to stand alone, and freedom is essential to me. How dreary, how intolerable life looks at present!—everything seems ended," she thought, "but this cannot last! I am still young and fair—and successful! But what enjoyment have I ever known! I *will* enjoy—I *will* drink the cup of pleasure—I shall forget Brandon. He is not the only man in the world! Others, more brilliant than he is, shall love me, and give me the zest for existence he has robbed me of. I shall take the best they can give and fling them aside. Some one will yet rouse in me the divine passion he has crushed, and I shall yet reap the fruit of my patient waiting, my long endurance. With wealth and resolution and *some* regard for appearances I may do what I choose with impunity—who *dare* question me?"

Brandon, who had been to and fro to town and to Lord S——'s place more than once, had not seen Major Selby or any of the family since he parted with Claude and Kate. He had returned a few days before this period of our story, and was so busy that he had not been able to call at Gainsborough Gardens. He

appeared himself to be drifting apart from Claude Tracey. To converse with her had become an effort, yet her voice, the gentle deliberation of her speech, were as charming to him as ever.

He was meditating a new and decided step, which might separate them more completely yet. Musing on these things as he walked up Whitehall, his progress was arrested by a distinguished-looking footman who said deferentially that "her ladyship wished to speak to him." Brandon followed him to an open carriage where Lady Elmslie sat. He was struck and touched by the change in her looks; she was white, with shadows under her large tragic dark eyes.

"Ah, Ralph," she exclaimed, "I would not let you cut me," and she held out her hand with a smile.

"Cut you, my dear Lady Elmslie," said Brandon kindly, "what an idea!"

"Oh, I saw you were in profound thought, and were quite unconscious of my presence. Now, come in and come back with me to the hotel. You do not despise a cup of tea?"

A little wondering at her superiority to himself in coolness and self-possession, Brandon accepted her invitation, and they were soon at Mivart's, and seated in Lady Elmslie's private room.

"I am glad I met you," she said, slowly sipping her tea. "I did not like to write: and you—you might have called."

"I did not dare," said Brandon in a low voice.

"Are you so conceited as to think I must pine away and die, because you are hard-hearted?" and she laughed, not pleasantly.

"Certainly not," he returned with some embarrassment, "you are far too thoroughly a woman of the world to care for a bauble to which memory gave a momentary value."

Lady Elmslie smiled, but did not answer immediately.

"I want to ask you one or two questions. I have heard a rumour that you are going to India on a secret mission? Is it true?"

"I may go to India, but certainly not on a *secret* mission. I have half promised to collect materials for a report on the land of a tribe in Southern India which the government thinks might be of use."

"Oh, I daresay, and on a good deal more besides," said Lady Elmslie. "It is an important step up, Ralph—important enough, I daresay, to induce you to leave the field to your rival."

"I have no rival," said Brandon calmly.

"However you may fence, Ralph, I know you have exchanged the indifference you used to feel towards the woman who rejected you for a real passion. A hundred subtle indications come back to me, which I had noticed and banished from my mind, now I fear there is no hope for you. I drove over to call on Miss Tracey to-day. I have just returned. At the corner of the road I saw Sir Philip walking towards town. He was too engrossed by his own thoughts to recognise me, but such a look of radiant triumph I have rarely seen on any man's face. I did not stop him, and when I reached the house, curious to relate, no one was at home, even to *me*. Believe me, Sir Philip had just been accepted."

"By whom?" asked Brandon. "There are three young ladies under Major Selby's roof."

Lady Elmslie smiled scornfully.

"A wretched evasion," she said. "When a man wants money as Philip Brandon does, he generally chooses the best dowered of the three."

"Then it is my business to see my ward's money properly tied up," said Brandon, with provoking *sang-froid*. "Philip is not a bad fellow, and may make a pleasant husband. And now, tell me what are your plans. I did not expect to meet you in town so soon."

"You know I only took Becksdale for four months, and I had such stupid people with me after you left that I broke up my establishment there a few weeks earlier than I intended. I shall go to Cannes next month, then to Algiers. Next spring I can enter into society, and renew the old round," she said wearily.

"And be the centre of an admiring throng as usual," added Brandon, rising to take leave.

Lady Elmslie made a stiff, disdainful gesture.

"I wonder when we shall meet again?" she said.

"It is hard to say. I shall be in no hurry to return to England, *if* I leave it."

"It is good-bye then, Ralph?" she said, in a hard tone.

"Yes, for the present at least. Who can tell what to-morrow may bring forth. I shall be sure to hear of you. You cannot hide your light under a bushel, even if you would."

"You may hear *of* me, Ralph. You shall never more hear from me."

"Do not say so, Lady Elmslie. If I could ever

be of the slightest use to you, I trust you would not hesitate to command me."

"Good-bye," was her only answer, as she turned from him, and with a sense of relief, Brandon left her.

Could her conjecture be correct. Could it be possible that Philip had been accepted by Claude? Brandon did not believe it. He was not the sort of man suited to Claude. As for *him*, he might want her money, but he was not in love with *her*. "At any rate, Claude will hear from her uncle the subject of our long consultation to-day: this must move her to communicate any offer she may have had, and I shall at least see my way clearly," was his concluding reflection.

But this eventful day was not yet done.

The ladies of Major Selby's family had gathered in the drawing-room, and were waiting for dinner.

"I wonder your father has not returned, he will be late for his party," exclaimed Mrs. Selby.

"Yes, and he has to dress," said Kate, rising from the piano, where she had been playing softly in the ruddy firelight. "I put out all his things, and made him a nice buttonhole."

"He is not often unpunctual," added her mother.

"Where is he going to dine?" asked Janet.

"At Colonel Sutton's. It is a gentleman's dinner, mostly old Indians."

Here Major Selby made his appearance.

"You have scarcely time to dress, Dad," said Kat going up to him, and pressing an unusually tend kiss on his cheeks.

"I am not going, my dear—poor Sutton has r

with an accident, slipped on a piece of orange peel, and sprained his ankle. I heard it at the Club, and went to inquire for him, which made me late. There is a telegram downstairs to put me off. Hope you have something to eat, my dear"—to his wife—"I believe it is the tendency of women, when left to themselves, to substitute tea for dinner."

"Don't generalise," returned Mrs. Selby. "You shall not starve. What a long day you have had, dear."

"Yes, I was quite three hours with Brandon to begin with. He is one of the finest fellows—but I will tell you all about it, Claude, after dinner. Tell them to bring it up. I won't be five minutes washing my hands. Kate, my darling, you are looking pale; your eyes are bright, but your hands are burning, feverish. What's the matter? I trust in Heaven you are not going to have measles. I hear they are very much about, eh?"

"Measles! oh, dear, no, Dad," cried Kate, laughing heartily. "I only have rather a bad headache. I shall go to bed after dinner, and be all right to-morrow."

"I hope so, my dear. I really think you want looking after," and Major Selby hurried away to his dressing-room.

"What can Uncle Selby have to tell me about Mr. Brandon?" asked Claude, of the company generally.

"I haven't an idea," returned Mrs. Selby. "Something about money matters. Come to dinner, there is the bell."

The repast was somewhat silent, the largest amount of talk being contributed by Janet and the

Major. Kate looked very pale, and did not seem to care for her dinner, and Claude could think of nothing but the revelations promised by her uncle.

"Come, Claude, come away to my den. I have a good deal to say to you. I'll tell you everything later on, my dear," this to his wife.

Claude readily followed her uncle to a diminutive and rather draughty apartment opening on a balcony at the back of the house from which steps led to the general garden. Here she made haste to light the lamp and find her uncle's cigar case.

"Thank you, my dear," said the Major, seating himself in his arm-chair.

"You know I had a note from Brandon this morning?"

"No, uncle, I did not."

"Oh, well, I had; so I went straight to him. He first told me he had accepted this appointment or mission, or whatever it is, which Lord S—— offered him, and he thinks he will start about the tenth of November."

"Why, uncle, that is scarcely three weeks off."

"He wants to know if I would act deputy-guardian in his absence. Of course we had to discuss many matters *apropos* of this. By George, Brandon seems to have thought of the smallest minutiæ. Finally he told me he had, the previous day, executed a deed making over to you every farthing of your father's money. He hasn't kept a sou, not a sou! by George. He said he always intended to make it over to you, but as he is likely to run some risks in the expedition he has undertaken, he resolved to make all secure before he started——"

"But, uncle," interrupted Claude, in much agitation. "I cannot have it. I will not accept it. You should not have agreed to such a proposition; he wants the money, his share of it, I mean, a great deal more than I do. Oh, why did you let him!" She wrung her hands, and walked up and down in great distress.

"My dear child, it was an accomplished fact before he said a word about it to me. He was afraid, if he died out there, his next-of-kin would bag the fortune. I always knew he intended to give you a big slice of it, but I never thought he would settle the whole on you. He says nothing would induce him to keep a penny of it. Has anything gone wrong between you? for he seemed to think you would rather be under my guardianship than his?"

"Nothing, nothing whatever," said Claude, who had resumed her seat, and was evidently in deep thought. "He has always been wonderfully good to me, and I have always felt the same sincere gratitude towards him."

"Then I do not know what's wrong, but something is," returned Major Selby, knocking the ashes off his cigar. "There is a change somewhere."

"Uncle," exclaimed Claude, with sudden decision, "I must see Ralph Brandon, and talk to him myself. I must—I have something to urge on him that—that will influence him. I will write and ask him to come here if possible to-morrow early. I do not think he will refuse what I am going to suggest. You are not obliged to go out to-morrow, dear uncle?"

"No, certainly not, if you wish me to stay in."

"Yes, I shall be sure to want you. I will write to Mr. Brandon at once."

"Do, my dear; but you will not move him."

"Perhaps not—yet I must try. I know more than he thinks."

"I always thought you a bit of a witch, Claude, now I am sure of it."

"I wish I were, I wish I were," murmured Claude, as she went quickly across to the writing-table, and wrote:

"My dear Guardian,

"If you possibly can, *do* come and see me early to-morrow. I want very much to speak with you.

"Yours most truly,

"Claude."

She showed it to her uncle before closing the cover.

"Ay, that will fetch him," said Major Selby, with an approving glance. "Now, my dear, if you have no objection, go tell your aunt that I am very tired. I'll just take forty winks."

"Of course I will tell auntie, especially if she is alone." And Claude ascended to the drawing-room, where she found Mrs. Selby busy with some useful fancy work, and alone, Janet having already gone upstairs to bathe Kate's brow with eau-de-cologne and water.

Mrs. Selby was profoundly interested. "I always liked Mr. Brandon," she said. "What a difference between him and that hair-brained cousin of his! But I am rather sorry, for there is some wounded pride—some hidden reason—for this extraordinary

self-abnegation. I don't understand it. I suspect his life has been a little hard."

"I am sure it has," replied Claude, in a tone of conviction which surprised her aunt. "But throwing away his money is not the way to improve it, or secure his future. I am almost angry with him."

"Are you?" said Mrs. Selby, rather drily. "I confess, Claude, you puzzle me, and irritate me a little, too."

"Do I?" exclaimed Claude, much surprised. "I am very sorry. I have not often vexed or irritated you."

"No, dear, very seldom, indeed, and I have perhaps no right to quarrel with you for want of perception."

"Perception!" repeated Claude.

"Never mind my enigmatical speech, dear," said Mrs. Selby, laughing. "I will explain myself some day. Now will you write a few notes for me, my dear? I want to finish this corner before I go to bed."

* * * * *

Brandon was by no means surprised when he found Claude's little note on his breakfast table. He felt sure she would attempt to dissuade him from his purpose, not realising the difficulty of undoing a legal settlement.

He almost dreaded the interview she proposed, yet did not for a moment think of evading it. It would be a painful process to listen to her avowal of an engagement with Sir Philip, yet, in spite of Lady Elmslie's assurances, Brandon did not, could not, quite believe, that Claude had absolutely accepted

his cousin. But how could he tell? It was all a chance—a mystery.

Having written some letters, which could not be postponed, Brandon set off on his journey due west.

A hansom was just turning round when he reached Gainsborough Gardens, and a gentleman, who had probably alighted from it, was standing on the door-step, waiting for admission. The gentleman was Sir Philip Brandon.

"Hallo! Ralph, you are an early visitor like myself, but you must let me have the first word with Major Selby," cried the young baronet, turning to greet his cousin with such a radiant, triumphant expression, that Brandon's first thought was, "I am an intruder," his second, "but I came by Claude's own invitation."

"My dear fellow," he said, "I have come to see my ward. I leave the undisputed possession of the Major to you."

Here the smart parlour-maid opened the door, and looked somewhat puzzled at the double demand.

"Major Selby is in the study, sir," she said, hesitating.

"Then ask if I may come in," returned Sir Philip.

"Yes, sir," she replied, adding to Brandon, while she threw open the dining-room door, "Please walk in here, sir."

"I'll have something to tell you that will open your eyes, presently," said Sir Philip, *sotto voce*, as he followed the servant to the Major's study.

Brandon walked to the fireplace, that refuge of the lonely, and stood there in deep and unpleasant thought.

There could be but one reason for Philip Brandon's beaming joy and evident exultation, for his early interview with Major Selby, yes, there could be but one reason. And Claude, with the overflowing generosity of great happiness, was anxious her guardian should take back his splendid gift, or at least half of it. Whether Philip would join his *fiancée* in this desire was another matter. At this point in his reflections, the door opened, and Claude came in quickly, as if eager and agitated, and held out both hands to her guardian. There was no look of joy or exultation in her face; dark shadows lay beneath her eyes; she seemed slighter and frailer than she did two months before.

"I am so glad you have come," she exclaimed (for her) impetuously. "I have been longing, burning to tell you that I will *not* have it. I will not take my father's money from you. I know *all* you give up in renouncing it, and I will not take it."

"My dear Claude," said Brandon, still holding the hands she had given him. "You have quite excited yourself. You must hear what *I* have to say."

"I cannot listen to anything," cried Claude. "I would have taken the half. The whole, I will not consent to accept."

"Sit down, my dear Claude," drawing a chair forward. "Pray sit down, and listen to me."

Claude obeyed, and, resting her elbow on the table, covered her eyes with her hand.

"You must know what a shock your father's will was to me," he went on. "I at once resolved not to accept the bequest, but, to save trouble and discussion, I decided to say nothing of my intentions, dur-

ing your minority, though I arranged with your uncle to make you a sufficient allowance. When you proposed dividing what ought to have been all your own, I did not contradict you, for I preferred not to raise any discussion, until I had put the matter beyond dispute. Circumstances have changed. I am going into a remote and unsettled country, and you—you are—may I venture to say so?—about to pass into the guardianship of another."

Claude did not contradict this assertion, thinking Brandon alluded to her uncle.

"I thought, therefore, it right," he resumed, "to inform Major Selby, and asked him to tell you I could be happy under no other settlement of the matter. It will be a considerable time before I return to England; my views are a good deal changed." He stopped abruptly. Then in an altered tone: "Do you know that Philip Brandon is closeted with your uncle?"

"Yes."

"And the object of his visit?"

"I think I can guess," said Claude, with a sweet arch smile.

Brandon gazed at her with a stern, penetrating glance, and his brows contracted as from sudden pain. "Then you will understand," he said, "that I naturally wish to leave your affairs clear, settled, and prepared for the change in your condition."

"When I come of age?" asked Claude, with a puzzled look. "Will you not come back by that time—it is nearly a year off?"

"When you come of age," repeated Brandon. "You are not going to wait for that?"

"I do not quite understand you. But I want you to understand that I will not take your money, and spoil your life. Forgive me for touching on what may offend you, but I know more than you think." She paused, and then hurried on with downcast eyes, while the hand with which she rolled and unrolled one end of the ribbon at her waist trembled.

"I know how long want of money has kept you back from happiness. I know how long you have waited for one you love. Believe me, I say it with true sympathy, and I will not take from you the hope, the happiness you deserve. Do not be angry with me for speaking frankly, do not."

"Claude, what, in Heaven's name, do you mean. What ridiculous story has Philip been telling you?" interrupted Brandon, amazed and confounded.

"Sir Philip? He never told me anything."

"Explain yourself then, Claude. Tell me simply what you have heard. I have a right to know. I am not going to be angry; speak out freely."

"I hardly like to do so, but I will if you promise never to ask who told me."

"Granted; I never will," returned Brandon with a cynical smile.

"I was told then," said Claude, clasping her hands together, and resting them on the table, "that a long time ago you were deeply attached to a girl who loved you, but neither of you had money enough to marry. Now you have, and you throw away your own happiness and hers, to gratify your pride, by giving me what was not intended for me."

Brandon had stood gazing down into her eyes with an earnest searching look, from which all cynicism

and sternness had vanished. Before speaking, he walked away to the window and back.

Overpowered with the nervous dread of wounding him, and feeling for him, from her inmost heart, Claude rose and leant against the back of her uncle's ponderous arm-chair.

"And you believed this?" said Brandon—a chord of indignant pain sounding through his deep tones, as he paused opposite to her—"you believed that I asked you to be my wife, in order to enrich myself, while my love, my devotion was given to another woman. I must indeed have fallen in your estimation."

"It gave me infinite pain to believe it," exclaimed Claude. "I am most unhappy when I cannot think highly of you, but I cannot help believing——"

"Why do you give more credence to your informant than to me. I know who she is, I understand her motives, we need not name her. She has told you the devil's own mixture of truth and falsehood. Listen to me; I have a right to be heard."

"Speak," said Claude in a low voice.

"It is quite true," resumed Brandon, "that years ago I did love a very fascinating girl, passionately. I lost my chance of fortune and position, and she decided—wisely from her point of view—to break with me. It was a severe blow at the time, and gave me—well, a bitter tonic, which was strengthening in its effect. Then she passed out of my life and left no trace behind." Again he walked to and fro. "When I made the great mistake of asking for bread, when I could but offer you a stone in exchange, I was absolutely free in heart and mind, and I thought—

Great Heavens—I thought that you and I might live a tranquil life—undisturbed by passion—in the cold-blooded monotony of mutual esteem. So far I was honest, Claude."

"I believe it; I believe *you*," exclaimed Claude restored to self-possession by his tone.

"I did not know you then," he went on. "I did not know myself. Now to my sorrow I know both, and know what I have lost. Your fortune is nothing to me—you will need it all in your new position."

"What new position?" exclaimed Claude. "*I* shall be the same though I am a year older."

"Do not argue with me," he returned, drawing near her. "Let me in some measure atone for the mistake I once made; let me keep you separate in my memory, in my heart, from the Mammon-worship which led me astray, which you have so amply punished."

"How, Ralph?" cried Claude, greatly moved by his tone. "Why should I punish you? I wish to make you happy to—to——" Her voice failed, the tears would come.

"I ought not to agitate you," said Brandon, mastering his own emotion, "or cast a shadow on what ought to be the happiest day of your life. Let us part friends; there is no need for any further farewell; it would be more than I could bear. It is my fate to be checkmated by my kinsman, but not through any intention of his."

"How can he interfere between you and me, Ralph?" she cried, growing white, and feeling scarcely able to steady herself, now the parting she dreaded was so imminent.

"How can you ask the question," he said sternly. "You admit you know the reason for this early interview of his with Major Selby?"

"I guess, I do not positively know, though I feel sure it is to ask my uncle's consent to his marriage with Kate!"

"With Kate Selby!" exclaimed Brandon; and stood silent for a moment. "Are you sure of this?"

"As sure as one can be from observation."

"Are you indifferent to him?"

"No, I like him very much. I think he can make Kate's life very sunny."

"I have been terribly misled," said Brandon. "Have we been playing a game of cross-purposes? I will risk all and know the truth." He drew a step closer. "Claude, do you know why I want to leave England? to abandon the lines which I had laid down for myself?"

"I cannot tell," she murmured.

"Because it is intolerable to be so near to you and yet so far. Do you not know, Claude, do you not feel that I have fulfilled all the conditions you demand from the man you would marry? You said that the eyes, the voice, the touch of that young German soldier, whom you described to me, when I humbled myself before you, all betrayed his love. Do mine express nothing? Can you be ignorant that I love you as passionately as deeply, as truly, as man has ever loved?"

"Once," said Claude in low tremulous accents, "once, for a moment, I felt I was more than a friend to you, but doubt came soon."

He came to her side, and took her hand in both his.

"What am I to you, Claude? What do you wish me to be?"

She raised her eyes steadily, gravely to his, and the colour left her cheek as she said almost with solemnity, "I wish you to be my guardian, Ralph, till death us do part."

"Amen," he returned, drawing her gently, yet irresistibly to him, and clasping her in a close embrace. "You give me fresh hope, fresh energy. My beloved, I once dared to offer you the sober certainty of a tranquil home, secure in my own friendly serenity, and now the touch of your hand thrills me with a subtle delight. To hold you against my heart sets my pulses throbbing. Once, you kissed me by mistake, and from that hour I have never ceased to long for your sweet lips. Can I ever obliterate your first impression that I was a selfish worldling?"

"I know you now, I can never mistake you again," murmured Claude, as she let him raise her hands to his neck, and yielded to the tender warmth of his embrace.

"And you will be my own dear wife when I have accomplished this mission," said Brandon, when, after a few moments, they had come down to earth again. "I cannot draw back from it."

"Take me with you," she murmured. "Do not leave me."

"But dear, the country is rough, indeed scarcely safe."

"I need not go into dangerous places, but I can be nearer to you than in England, Ralph."

* * * * * *

That was a great day in Gainsborough Gardens. Sir Philip made a clean breast of it to Major Selby, and succeeded in convincing the kindly soldier that his affairs were by no means in a hopeless condition, but that a few years of prudent retrenchment would set him on his legs again, especially with such a coadjutrix as Kate. Mrs. Selby did not give in at once to her husband's views, but Sir Philip's honest and sincere attachment to her daughter touched the mother's heart, and the course of true love, in spite of the proverb, promised to run smooth.

"As Claude and Mr. Brandon want to start early in December," said Mrs. Selby, a couple of days after this double event, "I think we must yield to Sir Philip's entreaties and have two weddings together. Two pairs of turtledoves billing and cooing about the house at once, are too much for any one's patience."

"What will Mr. O'Hara say?" exclaimed Kate. "He will never forgive me."

"Oh, yes, he will," exclaimed Janet. "He is the sort of man who always accepts the inevitable. He will say 'Begad! Miss Selby is a fortune in herself, and is worth her weight in gold.'"

"And so she is," cried the Major, "as Sir Philip will find out. He and his cousin are a pair of lucky beggars, but though their gain is our loss, I'll not be so narrow-hearted as to begrudge them what no amount of Mammon could pay for."

THE END.